

The
Long Arm
of the
Mounted
Dorrance

The Long Arm of the Mounted

James French
Dorrance



MACAULAY

Walter E. Merritt

Walter E. Merritt
Chatham, N.B.
Box 336

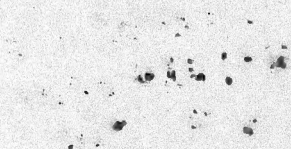
Enswick

Canada

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 11-11-01 BY 60322
CHATHAM BOX 76
N B CAN

②

811
D716L



72.12.13/9

**THE LONG ARM
OF THE MOUNTED**

THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

BY
JAMES FRENCH DORRANCE
Author of "Never Fire First"

Frontispiece by
EDWARD C. CASWELL

NEW YORK
THE MACAULAY COMPANY

**COPYRIGHT, 1926,
BY THE MACAULAY COMPANY**

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I ACROSS MEDICINE LINE	11
II RESCUE UNWELCOME	22
III IN THE WRONG PARTY	32
IV RIDING BOOT RIVALS	43
V TOO MUCH LUCK	50
VI SEALED LIPS	63
VII LAST WARNING	78
VIII THREAT OF DOUBT	91
IX BUST 'EM, BRONCHO	104
X HOME OF FLAME	117
XI DID HE DARE?	132
XII BY SINGLE STRAND	143
XIII IN PUNISHMENT GULCH	155
XIV HIS BIGGEST DEBT	171
XV TRAPPING FOR PROOF	187
XVI CLEAN AS A HOUND'S TOOTH	196
XVII CALLING A BLUFF	208
XVIII RUSTLED TO A FINISH	222
XIX SURPRISES FOR FLAME	236
XX POOR BRANDED MAN	250

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXI THE NEST OF THE CROW	266
XXII THREAT OF SPIKES	276
XXIII COMING A CROPPER	286
XXIV OUT OF THE NEST	299
XXV GRIP OF THE LAW	309

To
ESTHER DORRANCE
OUR BELOVED AUNT
AND
SUBSTITUTE MOTHER

THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

CHAPTER I.

ACROSS MEDICINE LINE.

AN inanimate monument of whitewashed stones glistened in the moonlight as though each boulder was of pure platinum.

Not much to enthuse about, especially were you the one who had helped in its erection in the years of your youth; yet sight of it gripped John Childress, sergeant of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, much in the same way as Miss Liberty, down in New York harbor, takes hold of the immigrant entering the alleged promised land. For the moment he forgot that he had ever had a part in long-ago boundary-line marking. A touch of spur, a lunge of willing horse and he was on—he was across “Medicine Line,” thus giving, as did the non-com in his thoughts, the Indian name to that more-or-less mythical smear which separates all King George’s American acres from all of Uncle Sam’s.

Childress was riding a draw in the hills which

12 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

gave from the States into the Fire Weed Country of Canada's marvelous West. He wore the scarlet-blue-gold uniform that knows no stain. The horse he rode, a gray stallion whose coat glistened like silver in the moonlight, might have looked white under sun-glare, but in any light he was *somebody's* horse.

At the heels of the gray tailed a brindle hound. Poison was his name—just that all may know his disgrace and have it over with. Childress had bought the horse down in Missoula, when his service mount had gone painfully lame from the hard riding of a scouting trip on the star-spangled side of that mythical boundary line. Poison, the pup, who had grown to believe that the big gray and he were kennel-mates, had followed along, in that faithfulness of beast to beast which passeth human understanding. The sergeant possessed no bill-of-sale for or to the dog. Repeatedly, in his severest regimental manner, he had ordered the queer-looking canine home. But always a snort from the silver beast had countermanded orders. At that, after closer inspection of Poison, the sergeant decided none would make pursuit for recovery.

Although Luna was silvering that she'd be gone and night-dark soon would be there, Childress was not hurrying into the Fire Weed Country. To be

sure, there were ranch-houses where he might have spent a comfortable night, but, no matter how soft the bed, he must have suffered because of his uniform. Give him just a week or two, a visit to a caché already made, and he'd be as plain a looking citizen as ever forked a horse. He was going into mufti, the penalty for secret service in the "Royal." To-night he meant to skirt the region, seeing no one of the local ranchmen. But he was coming back a plain cow-punch in an effort to solve the problem of stock that must have been exceedingly sick to drift so regularly across "Medicine Line."

Childress was a mile beyond the border when the hit-hit-hit of a horse coming at race-track speed caused him to draw rein and wheel the silver bulk of his mount across the trail. Came at once a whine from Poison.

"What's the matter, pup?" he asked, as the hound lofted himself against the stirrup. "Do you think they've missed you over in the States and are needing sausage-meat?"

Poison, perhaps realizing his limitations, did not say.

"Don't worry, brute," he said laughing. "You're an alien now and The Force'll look after you."

As Poison licked the man's rein-tired hand, there came streaking through the moonlight what looked

14 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

to be a slender lad astride a rangy bay. The horse had gone lame in its right forefoot, but was making speed despite any handicap of pain.

"Pull up a bit, kid!" Childress shouted in time to prevent being run down by any blind rush. "What's the moonlit hurry."

The bay slid to a stop, almost within touch of the silver and scarlet apparition which blocked the narrow trail.

"Let me pass—let me pass!" The cry was in a treble that pronounced the rider either exceedingly young, or something else again.

"Sure, you can pass," said Childress. "I don't own this trail. But you might tell me just what's the all-fired hurry?"

At the moment a fleck of cloud shrugged one side of the moon, putting all the silver spot-light upon the uniformed sergeant.

"A Mountie!" cried the rider. "Thank God for a Mountie!"

"No desire to deny the uniform of the service," said the sergeant. "What can I do for you, son?"

For answer, a concealing hat of black felt was swept off and hung upon the saddle. The cloud took itself still farther from out the orbit of the moon, which then played all its light upon the reddest strands of braided hair that ever a girl

wrapped around her head. Such was the trust of the uniform that, honestly worn, never has failed woman, beast or mere man.

"Son!" laughed Childress. "One on me. What can I do for you, *sister*, that you're willing to thank God about in advance?"

The boy-clad girl plunged. "I'm Bernice Gallagher from the Lazy G Ranch. Some of that damn Yankee bunch down at Crow's Nest has been running off our stock. Thought I could get away with the boy stuff. One of our old punchers, the darned renegade, recognized me and chased me out."

She paused for breath. Sergt. Childress waited anxiously for her next word. The Crow's Nest renegades over in Montana and their particular connection with the rustling of stock out of Fire Weed was the detail which would take him into mufti in the next few days.

"Running me out of the Nest wasn't enough," went on the girl whose mane looked like flaming gold in the moonlight. "I went to the nearest county-seat of that State they call Montana. The Nesters followed, charged me with horse stealing, although this poor beast has been mine since he was a colt. They got up a posse of roughs that stood in. Been chasing me all afternoon—running me ragged. They're right behind me now, and

16 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

my horse is all in. Any wonder I thanked the good God for meeting up with a Mountie?"

Years of training in emergency had made Childress a man of instant decision. For no part of a second did he doubt the girl's story. And there came confirmation thereof in the distant thud of many hoofs. To get the flame-haired youngling out of danger zone became his first consideration.

"We'll swap horses," he suggested, swinging from the silver beast's saddle. "Off that bay, miss, and on your way. Meet me at Soda Springs anytime to-morrow and we'll trade back."

The girl tried to obey. But evidently there had been too much previous strain. As she kicked a boyish leg over the saddle horn, she collapsed in his arms—absolutely *out*, in a dead faint.

With suddenly terrified tenderness the sergeant—known throughout The Force as absolutely "hard boiled"—held her from any possibility of a fall. The flame head fell against his chest, pillowed upon the honor ribbons which, through luck and utter unconsciousness of death-fear, he had brought back from the World War. Her lips were parted, her eyes closed. But he noticed, as his arms tightened about her and he leaned to utter anxious words into the fragrance of her hair, that a rich, healthful color began to spread upward into the creamy-tan of

her cheeks. Recent years in Arctic patrol, where Eskimo squaws didn't know how to pass out of any picture except from over-feeding on blubber, hadn't sharpened his experience, but he would have taken King's oath that no fainting girl ever looked so much like a blush-rose at dawn.

"Bernice!" he demanded, remembering the name she had given.

As suddenly as she had passed did she snap out of the faint. There was a more or less spasmodic hold upon him as she caught herself together.

"Mount the silver beast—quick!" he directed.

"But, sergeant, there are five of them!" she cried. "I counted, looking back from the top of the hill, just the other side of the boundary."

"You heard me, girl," he snarled, a tone that few had dared disobey. "Make a dust away from here."

Bernice Gallegher watched his square-shouldered back, upon the scarlet coat on which the moon was playing so vividly, as he strode down the road to face, single-handed, the wild, rough-riding quintet who had followed the supposed boy, intent upon a necktie-party. For no fraction of a second had she thought of accepting his generous offer—considered making a "dust" away from her Providence-sent protector. Like a streak, she took after him.

18 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

The galloping horses of the outlaw posse pounded nearer and nearer. Sergt. Childress set himself squarely in the road, ready for King's-name confrontation. The pad-pad of the girl's rushing feet caused him to turn.

"You—here?" he grumbled, as though disbelieving that his order had been disobeyed. "Thought I told you—"

"Two guns are better than one against five," she said, panting. "It's my battle you're fighting and I've the right to help you shoot it out." From somewhere about her boy clothes she whipped an automatic.

"Too late," the sergeant groaned, as he saw the lead rider of the posse top the rise of Medicine Line. "Too late for a get-away. Behind me, woman!"

Childress would have made a perfect target as he stood mid-trail, the moon multiplying the brilliance of his uniform. But the weird light also showed the raiders what he was. Perhaps some of the band had felt the steel of the Mounted before. At any rate, his sharp "Who goes?" brought the girl's pursuers to a stop.

"We're chasing a hawse thief," drawled one of the interlopers, possibly the leader. "Let us pass an' we'll get him."

"Describe the stolen horse and the man you're after," said Childress. "The Mounted will get him for you"

There was momentary discussion in tones too low to carry to the ears of the uniformed obstruction.

"Come along with the description, if you're serious," prodded the sergeant.

"At him and over him, boys," someone of the five suggested. "Mounties never shoot first, you know."

Five horsemen lined up abreast, completely filling the trail. Touches of spurs must have ground the sergeant, and the girl behind him, into the dust, but neither of the two flinched.

With the heel of his boot Childress cut a line across the roadway. Doubting if any of the Americans could see, in the uncertain light, what he was about, the trooper explained.

"I've dragged a dead-line. Just try to cross it—any one, or all, of you—and learn that a Mountie shoots, perhaps not first, but always last."

"Hell!" growled one of the night riders.

"'Tain't worth the risk," advised another.

Childress waited, gun in hand, until patience ceased to be one of his virtues. "You're on Canadian soil, gents. The prospect isn't favorable for

20 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

any crop of armed invasion. Better head back home before you start something you can't fertilize. Otherwise I'll have to take you in charge."

"We're five to one," suggested the leader.

"Five to two," corrected a shrill voice from behind the sergeant. "Come to it, you cowardly Crows!"

Childress groaned inwardly at this unexpected intervention. Why couldn't women stay where they were put? Yet, perhaps, the shrilled invitation turned the tide of conflict. A moment's hesitation and the rope-carriers from the States turned their horses and trotted away into the night.

"To whom am I indebted?" asked Bernice as they walked back to their waiting mounts.

"Suppose we set it down to Lady Luck and your own nerve, young woman." ,

She might have pouted had there been any chance of his seeing the same in the flickering light. "But my father, when I tell him about it to-night, will wish to write a letter to headquarters commending your bravery."

Childress chuckled. "Child, they wouldn't know what to do with that up at Ottawa. If your father wants to do a real favor to the Dominion, you might tell him, for the Mounted, to do his own tracing of

rustled stock and to keep you at home where you doubtless belong."

Childress busied himself quickly with an examination of the bay horse's injured hoof.

"You're something of a brute, aren't you?" suggested Bernice.

He pretended not to hear. "Your horse," he said, "will carry you home if you don't crowd him. I'll camp trail-side, right here, so you needn't fear any change of mind on the part of your friends from over the border. *Good night!*"

The accent put upon this last decided the girl.

"Sergeant Brave but Impossible," she said, as she swung herself into the saddle, snapped a salute and was gone, for once in her flaming life obeying a man's orders.

When he had spread his slicker and persuaded the pup, Poison, to serve as pillow, Sergt. Jack Childress thanked the Lord that Canada grew such women. He drifted into slumber still wondering would this boy-girl of the range recognize him when clad in mufti. Important it was that she should not.

CHAPTER II.

RESCUE UNWELCOME.

THE hammer of hoofs came faintly to the ear of a khaki-clad rider who forked a rangy gray stallion. A light touch of gauntleted hand upon the rein halted the animal. Steel-colored eyes swept the rolling prairie, still bronzed in its winter overcoat. But even with his unusual height full-raised in the stirrups, he failed to discover the disturbance of the prevailing quiet. The contour of this particular section of the Canadian West was secretive, and he concluded that the noise must come from beyond the rise which fronted him.

Although a stranger in the border province, Sergeant Childress had been directed with sufficient detail to realize that he had ridden a considerable distance into the Whitefoot Reservation. This fact increased the puzzle, for the sound suggested a small stampede; yet he knew that the Indians, rationed by a benevolent Dominion, ranged few cattle. After further listening he felt assured that this was an approach of horses. The alert ears

of his handsome mount readily confirmed his judgment.

An excited yelp from Poison, the battle-scarred brindle hound that was the ununiformed sergeant's trail mate, soon foretold the exact cause of disquiet. Next moment the low-hung, gray body of a coyote streaked over the ridge with a pack of dogs in hot pursuit.

"Bucks must be wolf-coursing."

He spoke aloud, as he often did to four-footed companions, although he was just beginning to arrive at terms of friendship with the decidedly mismatched pair of the present expedition.

The hound evidently interpreted this observation as permission to join the chase. Perhaps he thought it was a command. Anyway he wanted to go. With a delighted yowl, he unlimbered into a speed that a rabbit-jack might have envied. He became just a brindle flash, so nearly the color of the winter-withered grass as scarcely to be discernible.

"Hell's-bells, you fool rabbit chaser, come back here!" Childress shouted. "Hyah, Poison, don't you know you're a white man's hound?"

But further commands, even had there been any forceful enough to recall that particular canine from the hunt, were smothered on his lips by surprise over the appearance of the first of the hunting

24 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

party. No Whitefoot — buck or squaw — was astride the lead horse, any more than the beast itself was an Indian pony.

For the coyote Childress had no sympathy.

From more youthful experience he knew that this was far and away the worst enemy of the stock raiser, and one that is not repulsed by civilization, as are other predatory animals of the plains. While the settling of a region generally brings about the rapid extinction of all wild animals, Mr. and Mrs. Coyote welcome the coming of the homesteader, make themselves very much at home with him, raise their young right under his nose and despite bounties, poisons or traps, manage to increase with Rooseveltian litters of six to nine a year. No, for the harassed coyote sympathy was lacking!

But for the rider who led the chase——

Startled eyes stared at a white woman, clinging to one of those pads of yellow leather which the English and the riders of park hobbyhorses call a saddle. Her hat was gone and her hair waved a black flag behind with its generous streaming.

Unquestionably her sorrel mount was a thoroughbred and making a pace that only a life-or-death mission could excuse on a course so preempted by prairie-dog towns. This was not sport that he

gazed upon, but folly which might at any moment be turned into tragedy.

Then he sighted a broken rein dangling from the useless bit and therefrom deduced the situation. Excited by the chase, the high-strung animal had become a runaway. The woman rider was helpless and in most imminent danger.

A touch of his unspurred heel upon the flanks of Silver caused the gray stallion to spring into action. The lean, powerful body gripped in the sergeant's thighs responded splendidly, and the race was on.

To his own risk from the burrowed habitations of the marmots John Childress gave no thought; he was riding to save the life of a woman. Nor did he pause to consider that the rider ahead was followed by friends, the beat of whose horses crowded upon his ears. He rejoiced that the proven speed of his mount assured his overtaking the runaway if only both beasts might avoid the all-too-many pitfalls presented by the dog-holes.

As he drew near, a cry came back to him from the woman. In the circumstances, any show of fright was excusable, and he readily condoned the frantic-sounding appeal for help. He did not need urging, especially as the fleeting glimpse of the face turned back to him showed the subject for the rescue to be both young and beautiful.

26 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

He sent an imprecation after Poison, when the hound, in joining the pack, caused the small wolf to turn sharply. The sorrel thoroughbred, who had forgotten training so completely as to run away, surely remembered to follow the dogs. The swerve with which changed direction was accomplished seemed almost to unseat the rider.

"Some rider, that girl!" The exclamation was wrung from Childress as he saw her regain balance with only the stirrups to aid. "But why the hell will anybody ride a saddle without a horn?" He did not attempt to answer his question into that piece of human folly.

As his own mount made the turn and closed up, his thought centered on the surest method of saving the fair rider. This was an emergency quite outside his varied experience. For a second his glance rested upon the rope coiled over the pommel in front of him. He knew that with this trusted "string" he could stop the stamper quickly, but such a stop, likely, would mean a dangerous fall for the woman; might utterly defeat, indeed, the purpose of his effort.

There was a safer, surer way if, in her fright, she was capable of giving him the slightest assistance. Riding alongside, he could pluck her to safety, holding her against his flank until the obedi-

ent Silver slowed to a stop. But if she insisted on clinging to that joke of a saddle, would his arm have the strength to wrench her from it bodily? At once he decided that the emergency demanded the attempt.

"I'll have you safe in another moment," he called to her by way of encouragement, as the silver beast came up to the sorrel's rump.

He did not understand the look she threw back to him, nor her effort to swerve the filly with the single rein that remained in her clutch.

"Don't!" he shouted. "Can't you understand? I mean to pick you off. I'll not drop you."

Every lunge of the big gray brought him nearer, even though the supposed promise of the competition seemed to give the other horse increased speed. Knowing what was expected of him, Silver needed no guiding hand.

Now he could have reached out and touched her. Next moment his horse fell into the other's stride and the fruit was ripe for plucking.

"Loose your knee grip!" he ordered with authority. "Don't be afraid." His voice was assured, and, indeed, there was small risk for her in the arms of one trained and hardened as was Childress. But this young woman, who never before had seen him, nor even ever heard of him, could not know that.

28 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

That she shrank from him he laid entirely to her panic. Nerving himself for supreme effort, he planted his weight firmly upon the shoe of the right stirrup and leaned toward her.

The cry which sprang from her lips was surely a warning, but did not deter him. His arm flung around a fragile waist and his grip tightened. Then, with a mighty heave, he lifted her clear of the English saddle and swung her into his own seat, finding a perch for himself upon the cantle.

At the moment there were no complications. The sorrel thoroughbred, relieved of the rider's weight, broke her stride, veered to one side and slackened her pace. Silver ceased down at command and slid to a stiff-legged stop. Only the coyote and the hounds, now led by Poison, the interloper, continued the mad dash across the prairie.

"What did you do that for?" came the indignant demand from the fair unknown in his arms. A breath hot with anger caressed his cheek.

"Do what?" he asked, utterly surprised.

"Drag me from my horse when I'd distanced the field! I wanted to be in at the death—all alone—by myself. I'd have won out except for your blundering. Never realized what you were attempting until you had hold of me."

A genuine disappointment tempered the flame in her dark eyes and the anger of her tone.

"But the sorrel was running away," Childress protested. "Don't you realize that you might have been——"

"The sorrel was running with the hounds as only Princess can run," she interrupted.

"Ma'am, your rein had broken and I was afraid——"

"I can't see in the least how that concerns a stranger," she flashed. "Did any one ask you to be afraid? Not I, at any rate. Down on the ranch I often ride Princess without any rein at all and she was obeying every knee signal I gave her until you crashed in."

A faint shout, succeeded by a chorus of the same, came from the crest of the rise which they just had topped so perilously. Childress looked over his shoulder to see a dozen well-mounted huntsmen and women gazing down at them.

"Oh—oh, they have seen!" cried his burden of beauty. "Set me down—instantly!"

A wilted feeling possessed the rescuer. In all good faith he had "run a beezer." The situation would not have been worse had he insisted on saving Annette Kellerman from drowning or putting out a fire consisting only of motion-picture smoke pots.

30 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

With a groan for his distressing blunder, he lifted her down; then meekly followed her.

"I'm right sorry, miss, or madam—" he was beginning when the eager baying of Poison sounded across the reservation, and he realized that he no longer held her attention.

"The dogs are going to get that coyote!" she cried. "And here I am helpless, unhorsed by you! The most exciting hunt the Strathconna Club ever held, too." Her red lips quivered, adding to his torture. "I'd have been in at the death if you'd——"

"It's not too late yet!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Take Silver, here, and cut across country. He's sure-footed and easily can outrun any horse in that bunch on the hill."

"But you——"

She was smiling over a prospect of triumph yet possible, though seemingly lost. To finish ahead on a strange horse would be a real victory!

"I'll rope your mare and follow."

As he spoke, he took his string from the saddle horn. Cupping his hands, he tossed her into the worn saddle that obviously was large enough for two of her mold. Places he found for the toes of her small boots in the straps that swung his stirrups.

A glance toward the field showed her that the

other members of the Strathconna Hunt Club, assured of her safety, had resumed the chase. Turning to him, her eager eyes danced a mischievous acceptance of his offer. A word from him sent the well-named Silver on his way, probably wondering in his equine brain what was the meaning of the suddenly lightened burden.

For a moment he stood staring after her. "My Stetson's off to you, young woman. You're a blue ribbon for nerve, a rose for looks; you sure can ride and you've got the courage of one of our own. Here's hoping you gather a brush!"

But his heart was hammering a troubled query. What a yearling she must think him?

The very idea of saving a lady from death who wasn't in the slightest danger of passing out and who particularly didn't wish to be saved!

CHAPTER III.

IN THE WRONG PARTY.

THE smile of Jack Childress was one of the famous smiles of the Royal Mounted, but it was not in evidence this brilliant morning of early spring. His attempt to save the girl had been really, honestly gallant, and he held nothing against her attitude. He had blundered, but the look she gave him on riding away astride Silver showed that she understood his intention and more, thanked him for trying, even though his try was a miss.

He started to stalk the sorrel, cropping grass nearby, evidently content at being relieved of the responsibility of the chase, now that she had no rider aboard. In this effort he was successful, thanks to his skill with the rope. Crawling up hand-over-hand, he closed in on the horse and repaired the broken rein.

The situation amused him. A "Mountie" with his string around another person's "hawse" in a land where autos still are "sniffy things" and the equine is one of man's most treasured possessions! And this at a time when a horse stealing band,

presumably from the States, had been so perniciously active on the ranges along the International border!

Of course, he was safe enough in the circumstance of the young woman having borrowed Silver, a horse whose shoulder-brand he felt confident none of the Strathconna riders would recognize. Yet his hold upon the sorrel gave him an odd feeling, and his expression was grave as he realized that his misunderstanding of the girl's danger had been a tactical error.

To enter the provincial metropolis in such spread-eagle fashion had been furthest from his intention. He was unobtrusive by nature and particularly so by calling, when not in the scarlet of dress-parade. The occasion of this visit, moreover, commanded particular caution. Yet here he was advertising himself and his presence in a most spectacular manner; first by attempting to rescue a lovely creature of the local hunt club when it seemed she neither required nor desired saving, and then by loaning her his unusual mount that she might ride the chase to its finish.

He gazed across the reservation's sweep to the point where the hounds had surrounded an exceedingly tired coyote. The horse nearest the pack was his own gray, and the hair of the daring girl rider

34 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

again was streaming straight out behind her as she held a firm seat on his over-large saddle and steered with a tight rein.

"Come what may," he murmured reflection, "she'll be in at the finish despite my blunder." But his smile was forced as he added to the filly: "Reckon, Princess, I can pay the piper for this unexpected dance."

Poison, the hound dog, was just that to the coyotes and would finish this one in short order. Served the pirate of the West as it deserved—miserable prey on small lambs and even older ewes, raider of chicken coops and panhandler at the cattleman's expense when it finds a calf lying under the shelter of some bush where it has been left while its mother grazes or hoofs to water. Yes, the coyote would get just deserts.

But when Childress viewed closely the features of one of the males of the hunting party—this a moment later—he feared that he might be overcharged for the "dance." Unless the description given him was at fault, the oncomer was the particular man of the Strathconna region whom he least desired to meet.

That florid complexion, that aquiline nose above a short-cropped, sandy mustache, that somewhat rotund but powerful figure and the red blaze of a

scar on the left cheek—all would seem to introduce to his expert eyes a certain Thomas Fitzrapp, manager of the well-stocked Fire Weed Ranch, thirty miles nearer the International boundary, the horses of which wore the Rafter A of the Andress brand—a half-diamond above the initial letter.

Had the sergeant's own mount been in hand, he would have postponed the meeting indefinitely by trusting to Silver's speed. As he could not race away on a horse belonging to a strange young woman, he decided to brazen out the encounter and, if necessary, revise his Strathconna program. Without troubling to readjust stirrup straps, he flung into the girl's saddle and rode toward the hunting party, which by now was surrounding the pack.

Fitzrapp, approaching at speed, hailed him sharply, with an arrogance of tone that added a last touch to the mental description which the Mountie held of the man he did not wish to meet. He was answered with a glance and a noncommittal "Howdy, stranger!"

"Where do you think you're riding with Mrs. Andress' saddler?" came indignant demand.

Lids narrowed over the eyes of the man in mufti as he surveyed the questioner, fashionably clad in a riding suit of gray whipcord. Andress? The

36 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

name removed any possible doubt as to the identity of the querulous horseman. But at Regina division headquarters, when he had received his secret service assignment to the Fire Weed country no one had said anything about the lady of the ranch being married. Certainly he was stumbling upon personages this morning!

"Who might you be and why do you question me?" Childress asked, the usual good-nature of his tone dulled by the other's arrogance.

"I'm Thomas Fitzrapp, master of hounds on this hunt into which you've inserted yourself."

"Inserted myself is correct, Mr. Fitzrapp, and I've a suspicion that I don't fit any better than a round peg does into a square hole. None the less I'm riding this filly to her owner that I may swap back for my own beast who happens to be stirruped more to the comfort of my legs. Can't see that anyone should object to that, not even the lady's husband."

Fitzrapp flicked his ivory-handled crop against one of his shining boots, at loss just how to handle this interloper.

"Mrs. Andress is a widow, sir, and somewhat under my protection." He offered this bit of news gratuitously. "Your accent tells me that you're from the States."

The mouth of Childress twitched whimsically. He had been in the United States and recently, but he was not "from" there in the sense meant by the assured master-of-hounds. He grasped the opportunity to cover his connection with "The Force" by an equivocal return.

"I haven't noticed much difference in accent either side of the line," he said. "Shall we join the bunch?"

Childress was not asking permission, not on this any-man's range. He did not wait for answer, but headed toward the hunters.

Their arrival found old Poison offsetting his lack of straight breeding by a strength of character that was causing considerable tumult among the hounds. The Strathconna fashion-folk hunted with a cross between the Russian wolfhound and the English grayhound, swift runners, quick at turning, but not always eager to kill. Gladly had Poison taken upon himself, it seemed, the right to toss the coyote. Then, moved by jealousy, the blooded pack had attempted to take the "brush" away from him.

By the time the sergeant arrived, the police dog had put three of them *hors de combat*, and was holding the rest at safe distance by threat of savage fangs. None of the men riders had cared to dispute the strange canine's right of possession on be-

38 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

half of Mrs. Address, who was clamoring for her prize as the first human in at the death.

"Me and mine sure are interfering with this hunt, folks," cried Childress as he reined the mare and sprang to the prairie sod.

He strode toward his dog, who began an indeterminate, equivocal wagging of his tail. "You darned old scoundrel!" he began, in a tone that only pretended to chide. "Can't you get it through your peaked roof that we're not invited to this party? Give me that wolf!"

The blow he sent Poison's way was accepted by that discriminating beast as a caress, and the dead coyote promptly was surrendered. Picking up a thirty-five pound specimen of the prairie pest, Childress turned toward the young woman, who still sat his horse and had just finished parking her disordered hair. Old Poison slouched at his heels, casting defiant glances from side to side at the other dogs.

"Here's your trophy, Mrs. Address," he said, removing his Stetson. "Let me apologize again and in behalf of the three of us for breaking into your hunt."

Her smiling return reminded him of the wiles of widows. "I can forgive you all," she said. "I haven't a doubt that you acted with the best inten-

tion, and this silver beauty of yours certainly gave me a flying finish. If you'll help me out of your outrageous saddle, we'll call it quits!"

As Childress gallantly handed her down, a fine-looking old gentleman with pointed beard swung nimbly from the back of a big bay gelding and approached with outstretched hand.

"Let me introduce myself," he began, "I am Ivan MacDonald, cast by fate in the rôle of uncle to this young hoyden. I've warned her repeatedly that this Indian reservation isn't a race course, even though it never has been cursed with barbed wire. I've begged her to be content with a nimble-hoofed cayuse instead of that spindle-shanked thoroughbred, and I hoped I had made some impression upon her. But to-day, through some excess of spirit, she got away from me—from all of us—and raced off after that little wolf as though Old Nick himself were after her. We topped the divide, sir, fearing to find her a bundle of broken bones, but were in time to witness your performance, as superb a piece of horsemanship as I've ever seen, and I've grown white in a horse-and-cow country."

The Strathconna riders, most of them mounted on sure-footed cayuses, who had gathered around, expressed their agreement with MacDonald's praise.

"You speak of me, uncle, as though I were still in

40 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

pinafores," said the widow, laughing, evidently in fine humor from having outrun the field and been in alone at the death.

"Well, your hair was certainly down your back a few minutes ago," declared the uncle. He turned to the stranger. "You don't know, young man, what a fright was lifted off my mind and heart when you whisked my beloved relative over to your own sturdy mount. Yours is the first masculine arm I ever approved of around her waist."

"Uncle," she protested. "Tell them the truth and spare my blushes. You know that it is the first time you ever saw any one's arm around my waist, whether you approved or not." She looked highly pleased with her repartee on noting that sufficient color had mounted the cheeks of the handsome stranger to show through his coat of tan. Obviously her delight increased when a side glance found Tom Fitzrapp to be frowning, evidently highly annoyed.

"Nothing worth speaking about—what I did," protested the under-cover sergeant, wondering if he really was embarrassed or merely pretending so to be.

"Any man near enough could have done it," snapped Fitzrapp uncautiously. "Stunt rider shuff!"

"I notice you were'n't *near* enough, Tom," laughed

Major MacDonald. "If our new friend of the silver horse had held to my little spitfire after he had her good and rescued, I'd have been better pleased. But then, knowing her powers of persuasion, I can understand his weakening." With frank, friendly directness, he turned to the civilian-clad Mountie. "Whom have I to thank for my niece's rescue?"

"Wasn't rescued," the widow flashed insistence, but for once without commanding male attention.

"Name's Childress—John Childress. Am having my first intimate look-in at this province. May settle down here for a while if a rolling stone ever gathers moss enough to take root."

All of which was true as far as it went, but scarcely informative for King's-service reasons.

Evidently Fitzrapp disliked the attention which the stranger was receiving. He offered brusque suggestion that they go on with the hunt, assuring the riders that the hounds quickly would raise another coyote.

This proposal, however, brought a chorus of protest. Several glanced at their watches. The hour was noon and the majority decided that they had "hunted" sufficiently for that day. When he found that even Mrs. Address was content with her single triumph, the "master" called in the dogs.

42 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Ride with me to the city, Childress," Major MacDonald suggested cordially. "If there's anything about our prize province that you want to know, I'm supposed to be posted."

"That will be a pleasure, sir, though I can't claim it as a reward for my blundering this morning." He sent a meaning smile toward the colorful widow, but missed fire. She seemed not to have heard his remark about blundering, so intent was she in the adjustment of her saddle cinches.

"Then mount, and we're off," said MacDonald. The distinguished-looking major, in turn looked at his niece. His glance, too, was meaning, and advised her that she need not ride with them.

Poison growled parting challenge to the pack, then loped off at a hound's pace after the silver horse that was his pal. The three of them—man, horse and hound—each after his kind, had enjoyed thrills this suddenly eventful morning.

CHAPTER IV.

RIDING BOOT RIVALS.

ETHEL ANDRESS believed she knew the men of her immediate command. Hers was the assurance of a widowhood that, after two years, had lost its poignancy over the past for interest in the future. She felt sure of Thomas Fitzrapp, bachelor manager of her ranch in the Fire Weed country—more sure of his feelings than of her own. Her handsome, distinguished uncle was, she thought, an open book to her. She needed not even to turn down the corner of the page when she left off reading him. He was his own bookmark.

He was riding into Strathconna with this attractive stranger in order to try him out without any assistance from her. That was as obvious as a scare head in the *Montreal Star*. If this Childress man measured up, probably she would meet him again at the hospitable board of the winter house which they shared in the wonder town. If, for any reason, he failed to come up to the pioneer's rough but obligatory standard, he would ride out of her

44 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

life on the present occasion, and the incident of the morning would not again be mentioned.

In secret, the widow hoped that the unknown would prove sufficiently sterling for further acquaintance, for, even though she had berated him, his resource in what he had imagined an emergency had pleased her. Moreover, she liked the clean-cut, resolute look of him; his direct, outspoken manner; his appearance of having lived a great diversity of experience without too much wear and tear, and—this last count of the indictment essentially feminine—his waving chestnut hair. She offered no protest to her uncle's unspoken decision that she should ride with the other members of the club.

There was wisdom, she realized, in his precaution in a land filled with such a miscellaneous population as had crowded into their Western province in the last few years.

To the evident satisfaction of Fitzrapp, who had missed the major's glance of instruction, she ranged the sorrel alongside his mount. The dogs were under easy control, having lost all interest in any further close contact with the stranger hound, Poison. That for a time she was silent, gazing over the wonder panorama of the Canadian Rockies to the westward, did not trouble the man, for he was accustomed to her caprices and had forced himself

to possess great patience wherever and whenever she was concerned. Her initial remark on the ride home, however, was far from encouraging.

"From where—from what port of missing men do you suppose my attractive rescuer hails?" she asked, her manner so innocent as to deny a desire to stab him in a tender spot.

"He wasn't your rescuer," grumbled Fitzrapp.

"Would have been had I been in danger. From where, do you suppose?"

Fitzrapp flung back a gesture toward the Montana hills in the purple distance beyond the border and only a few leagues beyond the limits of her own Rafter A Range.

"From the States," he said with obvious grouch.

There ensued a quarter of a mile of silence. Tom Fitzrapp knew when to keep still.

"What makes you think so?"

She asked the question as though coming from the United States was some sort of a crime.

"I taxed him with it and he didn't deny."

"But I'm certain," protested the widow, "that on the coat tied to the cantle of his saddle there was one of our own distinguished conduct ribbons. Wouldn't that indicate——"

"There were many from the States in the Canadian war forces," Fitzrapp offered. "Probably

46 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

he's riding back to cash in on some bonus or other graft."

"Bonus—more than you'll ever cash," the widow snapped. The war had cost her a husband and any mention of it still had the lash of a whip for her.

Again they rode in silence.

That Fitzrapp had avoided war service by clever subterfuge and ostensibly meritorious home service was one of the things that continually cropped up between the fair owner of the Rafter A and the dashing foreman employed on advice of her uncle. The man knew better than to enter upon that subject. He regretted the slur that had crept into his tone in discussing the stranger.

But in view of his acknowledged suit for the hand, acres and herds of the widow Address he was not inclined to brook interference from any attractive adventurer, who might, only too easily, become attracted. As he rode the easy, homeward-bound pace, he considered means of blocking any growth of interest in the widow should the major be inclined toward Childress.

Suddenly a startling thought, an inspiration quite in keeping with the emergency, came to him.

"Did you notice, Ethel, the horse that stranger is riding?"

"Did I notice?" cried Mrs. Address enthusiasti-

cally. "Could I help noticing when he carried me several of the finest miles I've ever ridden? And just remember that the number of those miles is large, considering that my first hobbyhorse was a wall-eyed pinto cow pony, and that I practiced roping animals by tossing strings around the kitchen cat as soon as I could tie a knot."

"But I mean—what's the description of the horse?"

"He's a silver-gray stallion, probably a half-blood, but as beautiful a cross as you'll find in the prairie provinces," answered the widow, who knew horseflesh with that accuracy which most young women reserve for the latest fashions.

"And what have we heard about a silver stallion in the past year?" Fitzrapp asked gravely. "Have those renegades from across the border ever run any of our blooded stock off Rafter A that we didn't see or hear of their leader riding such a horse? Didn't I see a silver stallion myself in a lightning flash that stormy night when I so nearly ran them down at the boundary?"

Ethel gave him a startled glance. "Just what are you hinting at, Tom?"

"Don't want to be too hasty in judging any white man, but the possibility stands out that this chap who calls himself Childress may well be the head

48 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

of the rustlers, and that the silver stallion prancing ahead there may be the one he has ridden on his costly visits to the Fire Weed range. It won't do our interests any damage to be on guard."

There was no real reason why she should hold a brief for the stranger. None, except the feminine one that she liked his looks and that her lead in the romantic game she played from instinct was to take issue with Tom Fitzrapp.

"But you have no proof," she protested after a moment's thought. "If he is a rustler, why is he riding to Strathconna?"

"Of course, the facts against him may be mere coincidence," replied Fitzrapp, with that deference to her opinion which always had stamped him as fair-minded in her eyes. "But on the other hand, his coming to Strathconna may be sheer bravado. Suppose that he hopes to learn the location and worth of other breeders along the border. Suppose that he means to inquire into the plans of the Mounted Police. There could be a dozen reasons, my dear, for a visit to Strathconna, and, after the way they've run off with our stock, you surely don't doubt that the leader of the band would be bold enough to venture anything, do you?"

"He doesn't have the appearance of a horse

thief." Ethel Andress spoke aloud, but with the air of one meditating.

"Your woman's intuition is worth as much as my suspicion; but remember what your uncle says, that thieves seldom look the part. At any rate, it won't do any harm for us to guard your susceptible relative against the undoubted charms of this stranger."

At this the widow's face did not reflect the gravity one might have expected. Truth to tell, she was more diverted by what she was pleased to consider her most devoted suitor's jealousy of any possible rival than interested in his theme.

"Still seeing rivals in every pair of riding boots that come into the offing, aren't you, dear old grouch?" she said, laughing lightly. "Wouldn't it have been most awfully awful had the stranger worn chaps? If I were you, I think I'd try to cheer up. Come, I'll race you to town!"

Touching her whip to the sorrel, she dashed off toward the city that was the cow-town of yesterday, the tall buildings and sentinel-like grain elevators of which were to-day in close perspective.

CHAPTER V.

TOO MUCH LUCK.

STRATHCONNA considered itself a metropolis and, indeed, it was one such, in a budding, modified degree. There were electric lights, a gas plant, street cars, business buildings of brick more than two stories in height and the "Hunt Club." It had more of civic spirit and local pride than most towns of a million souls.

There was nothing old about it in the sense that Montreal and Quebec are aged. Even Winnipeg was patriarchal in comparison. But let any visitor mention "mushroom growth" and every loyal citizen, which included all who had lived more than three months within its bounds, took to verbal arms. To prove that there was nothing "over-night" about the situation, proud boosters took the stranger to the fork where Rowdy River met the Placid. There for more than a century the Hudson's Bay Company had maintained a trading post. The log walls of this still stood, considered as the town's most sacred relic, although the tremendously expanded business of the supply concern now was conducted from

a three-story brick building at a prominent cross-roads—pardon, at a prominent intersection of wide, paved streets. Strathconna was no toadstool. Strathconna was phenomenal. Strathconna deserved all the adjectives that might be coupled with a city. In addition, its skirts were draped with the grounds and race-track of the "Provincial Fair Association for the Breeding of Better Horses."

In Canada's Wonderland there are a dozen new towns quite like, and quite as ambitious as Strathconna—new as a Christmas gift clock and ticking as vigorously. With five years of Arctic patrol immediately behind, to Sergt. Jack Childress the town was sufficiently vital. He was disinclined to dispute the claims of its most ardent booster. It seemed to him that he had been but a moment out of the Frozen North. His visit to Ottawa, where, at the Mounted Police headquarters on Rideau Street, he had delivered a prisoner of international importance, seemed like a dream. So brief was it that he had not even crossed the bridge to Hull, the factory city in the "wet" province of Quebec which is the near-Broadway of the Dominion capitol and only five minutes away.

"One last detail, Jack," the commissioner of the Royal had suggested. "I know you've earned a rest, but this Fire Weed game has me puzzled.

52 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Take it and solve it and I can promise you an inspectorship."

They had been friends for years in the M. P. service and the fact that the one had risen to the topmost rank that The Force possesses had not changed their Jack-and-Jim intimacy. The commissioner envied Childress the years on the French battlefield, and the sergeant, returned to his old service, would have disputed with his competent fists any one who dared say that Jim Maltby's promotion had not been earned.

Early this afternoon, after parting from Major MacDonald, Childress had at last found a stable among many garages and negotiated a stall-without-bath for Silver. In many ways he was satisfied with the ride into town, having managed to ask more questions than he had answered. Evidently Poison did not understand that he was to remain at the stable with the wonder horse. Two blocks away from the barn Childress had found the hound at heel and had been forced to execute a personally conducted return of the beast.

Despite the fact that his time was limited, the scene at the intersection of King and Prince Streets, the hub of this self-nominated metropolis, held him for a time, an interested, wondering spectator. After years of sledding with dogs or behind rein-

deer broken to harness, he felt a certain thrill in watching automobiles, taxicabs and horse traffic struggle with electric cars for road room on the well-paved street. He found an eddy in the jostling throng of pedestrians and looked his lonely fill, marveling that the traffic officer, a municipal man, was able to keep from under.

The sidewalk crowd was the personification of bustle and particularly striking in its cosmopolitan qualities. Englishmen in loose-hanging tweeds rubbed elbows with the motley throng; the White-foot brave, his black hair in a ribbon tied braid, shuffled along in moccasined feet, followed by his squaw wrapped in a gaudy blanket; a Chinese with a basket of laundry upon his shoulder narrowly escaped collision with a Japanese truck farmer who staggered under the weight of his load of tubers; Canadians and Americans, indistinguishable in their similarity of feature and garb and gait; nor wanting were the disabled ex-service men, some still in uniform and on the crutches of continuing pain. Indeed, this was a world's melting pot on a smaller scale than he had noticed in Paris, London, New York, Montreal or Chicago.

But here in Strathcona, the self-styled "City Where Dreams Come True," he missed the hopeless faces that had so impressed him in other similar

54 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

crowds, for here every countenance appeared expectant. It seemed to be a city of buoyant youth, yet it was a city and therefore not for him. Already he felt a return of the stifling sensation that always came to him with paved streets and towering walls of brick and stone. He was eager to return to the open country, to throw his leg across saddle leather and feel under him the easy pace of Silver skimming the prairie. He rejoiced that two days at most should see the end of the business which called forth his present visit to town. Life in cities was all right for those who liked it, he reflected, but activity of another sort appealed more to him.

Several members of The Force wearing the brilliant uniforms of the "Mountie" off duty, passed by with the crowd. Two of them, with whom he had served on desperate cases, came so near that he could have touched their shoulders by reaching out with one of his long arms. As he was in civilian clothes, following the invariable rule of the Force, there was no recognition, and he gave no sign, such being the nature of his mission.

At the Chateau Royal, one of those Canadian masterpieces of hotel construction several score of rooms too large for Strathconna's present demands, he found quarters for himself. His "John

Childress" was registered as inconspicuously as possible and his address set down as "Harve, Montana," the last place in the United States in which he had spent any time on the present investigation.

Despite his modesty, he did not escape the local boosters, particularly the realtors who had everything to offer from corner lots to factory sites and "suburban estates with homes built to live." It was nearly impossible for him to persuade them that he was not an investor. Almost was he sorry that he had not risked acceptance of Ivan MacDonald's invitation to dine with the "family," a bid that marked the end of their ride together. At last, in self-defence, he went to a motion-picture theater, the key of his hotel room in his pocket. On return he made his entry so inconspicuous that the cards of four boosters who were awaiting him in the lobby were not delivered until he came down to breakfast in the morning.

Ten o'clock found Childress at the local office of the Maple Leaf Midland Railroad, a substantial building constructed of a stone that glistened like galena and came from one of the quarries along the line of the road that held an enormous land-grant acreage. Here, again, Childress encountered the "metropolitan" idea. In an ornate foyer an attendant, caparisoned with all the glory of an

56 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Oriental diplomat, assured him that *they*—doubtless meaning his company—had everything in stock from ready-made farms to cow ranges. Childress was directed to the “Department of Natural Resources” on the second floor.

Request brought forth a detailed map of the southern portion of the province. After some comparison between the map and the notes which his memorandum book held, he located the Fire Weed Range, and a particular section bearing the railroad’s ownership mark. This adjoined the extensive holdings of the Rafter A Ranch, touched on its western side the Gallegher Range and was not too far from the border for the purpose the sergeant had in view. That this parcel had remained unclaimed by either the Andress or the Gallegher interests seemed surprising and the best piece of professional luck that had come to Childress since his return from gathering Arctic “weather reports” and Eskimo murderers in the subnormal temperature of Frozen Solid Land.

“Guess that six hundred and forty acres ought to answer,” Childress mused, after an inspection of certain other vacant sections. “At least, I’ll be in the way of the somebodies who are raising all this mysterious rustling hell. Wonder why the Andress or Gallegher interests didn’t pick it up? I wonder?”

He gained the attention of a land agent behind the glass-topped counter and found him at once courteously attentive on remarking that he had heard the railroad was offering ready-made farms.

"Greatest idea ever worked out for the settler without considerable capital," declared the agent, with that assured belief that is seldom found except in realtors and missionaries. "Suppose you're situated so that you cannot wait to erect your home and farm buildings even with the help of the two thousand dollar loan that is offered on our other proposition. And suppose again that it is necessary for you to farm and make a living practically the day you start in western Canada. Then you *do* want one of our ready-mades—a four-room dwelling, a barn for eight head of stock, well dug and pump installed, farm fenced, and gates in place, fifty acres turned over by tractor plow and twenty years to pay." The agent beamed upon him.

John Childress did not lack response, seeming at once to catch some of the other's enthusiasm. "That sure does sound attractive," he said.

"You've had agricultural experience?"

"Might admit that," returned Childress, remembering his experiments with wheat, potatoes, onions and the ever-hardy radish at one of his last posts in the sub-Arctic.

58 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Married, of course?"

A look so surprised as to seem bashful came into Childress' face. "Married—eh? Not that any one could prove, I hope!"

The Maple Leaf Midland's land agent looked indignant. "Then you don't want a ready-made farm, young man. They are sold only to married men and are designed particularly for the comfort of families."

But he did not turn entirely away, this fatherly agent. He merely nodded to a young woman who had entered the office and was waiting at the map-spread counter. This nod said that he welcomed her and that she would be next to receive his attention. The sergeant looked up hastily, his attention attracted as much by the nervous tapping of the newcomer's fingers as by the railway man's momentary abstraction. He caught a glimpse of the "next" homeseeker.

The woman was young—scarcely more than a girl. She was tall and angular. Her face was flushed, possibly from the exertion of climbing the stairs in a hurry, but not enough to hide the freckles that bridged her impudently cut nose. Her eyes looked like two of the freckles enlarged, vivified, carefully rounded and placed, so brown and solemn they were. Her hair was the sort that oftenest

comes with such eyes, the color of flame, soft and very thick, as shown by the braided coronet exposed by her back-thrown felt hat.

Quite a good deal to take in at a glance; but there are glances and glances. Childress was trained to seeing much with his wide-range eyes. He was impressed—with a feeling that he should hurry his own transaction to save the flame lady any unnecessary impatience.

But the fatherly land clerk was addressing him.

"I should say, from the looks of you though, that you soon could remedy that marriage deficiency. There's nothing like trying. As a married man myself, I recommend the state, which needn't be what some call it—a condition of servitude for the male."

With a sense of bashful alarm, the sergeant saw him glance at the woman of marvelous hair. This became as near fright as he ever allowed himself to get when he realized that the unknown in the black riding togs must have heard and was finding difficulty in concealing beams of amusement. Childress, except for a prisoner or two who wore skirts, had enjoyed little experience with the sex he considered "dangerous." To him, romance was somewhere in the future—over the ridge ahead—after he had made good in the scarlet service to which he had committed so many of his active years—something

60 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

perhaps to be snatched up, if he were lucky, just before the decline set in.

"The only woman I ever thought enough of to marry—" began Childress, and then stopped.

"Ask her again, son," put in the paternal clerk.

"Was already married," the sergeant went on. "Isn't there any way I can get hold of this section"—pointing out the one he had selected—"without hitching into double harness?"

The land agent raised bushy gray brows at this request for an entire section which in Canadian land measurement represents six hundred and forty acres. He explained that the largest of the ready-made farms were but half that acreage; but he could sell him one section—or two, for that matter—on terms of one-twentieth cash and the balance in nineteen annual payments.

"This for me then," said Childress with decision, and he indicated the location he desired.

"For your own satisfaction, we require a personal inspection of the land you propose to buy before you buy it." The agent seemed somewhat puzzled by this unusual client.

"Inspected it on my way from the border," Childress explained. "If it don't turn the trick for me, I don't know of a vacant section that will. In

the beginning, I'll graze stock instead of cultivating. What's the initial payment?"

The land agent's eyes blinked at the easiest customer he had handled in many a day. Then he recited other requirements: occupation within six months of date of purchase; railroad reservation of all minerals, gas and petroleum; unencumbered ownership of stock if maintained in lieu of cultivation. But to all these provisos the sergeant nodded ready agreement, handed over the first payment and edged down the counter while waiting for his receipt that the flame lady might have her turn at the maps.

His face wore a satisfied expression over what he considered a good morning's work. The section of Dominion land was to serve, of course, as a cover for his professional activities in the Fire Weed country. "Nobody can raise serious objection to a man hanging around his own individual property and keeping his eyes open," he mused. "And these acres are going to be Jack Childress' ranch for the next year at least. Afterward—well, it will be a tough break if the 'case' lasts into a second payment."

An exclamation from the fair land-seeker who had followed him at the counter startled the sergeant from his musing.

"Too late!" she cried. "Do you mean that I'm too late—that the section has been taken up just

62 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

this minute?" There was anguish in every word of the cry and query.

He looked up to see the flame woman frowning at him.

"Some folks have too much luck," she declared in a voice the bitterness of which seemed calculated to reach his ears.

The voice did reach them and the vibration of the protest set those members burning.

"The ink's not dry on the transfer; perhaps—" the land agent began, then beckoned to him.

Not at once did the sergeant respond. From the first the voice of the woman applicant had puzzled him. Now, with a flash as of fire, the truth dawned upon him. Here was the Gallegher girl who had stood behind him in that Medicine Line clash with the outlaws from Crow's Nest. Praise be to moonlight—she seemed to have not the faintest recollection of any previous meeting!

CHAPTER VI.

SEALED LIPS.

SERGEANT JACK CHILDRESS found himself in an exceedingly difficult position, but one from which there seemed no honorable escape. The transfer papers to the section he had claimed were not yet returned from the official desk to which they had been taken for signature. He could not leave the land office without them, even had it been in his nature to run from trouble.

No great strain on the imagination was required to account for the land agent's unspoken summons. Probably he, too, had felt the pathos in the flame lady's voice. The sergeant was about to be asked to select another section, thus adding his own meed of tribute to the chivalry of the West.

Had it been a man who wished to contest his luck in the ranch lottery, Childress would have welcomed the issue. But a woman—so young a woman, with such dangerous hair, brought draft upon a sort of courage he seldom had been called upon to use.

He did not hesitate, at least not to any perceptible degree. His advance was slow, as if in doubt

64 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

that the land agent really had summoned him. On the way he studied this new and unexpected problem. Even as untrained in femininity as was he, certain deductions were possible.

Her dress, he was inclined to believe, wasn't really a dress at all, but a skirt attached to a waist of French flannel, possibly out of respect to Strathconna, the city. Well-worn riding-boots which showed beneath the hem told him that much. Through the combination her figure showed that it was of the slender, curveless strength which comes from a life of activity in the open. Easily might she have been prettier; yet she might have been a whole lot worse. He had a thought-flash contrasting this unknown with the dashing brunette beauty of the Indian reservation race the previous morning. What had got into Fate to throw him twice within twenty-four hours out of his wonted man's man groove?

"As long as you two strangers happen to be interested in the same section of our wonderful Dominion," the agent opened urbanely, "it occurred to me that you ought to meet." He glanced for reference at the girl's application blank and then at the completed one originally offered by the man. "Miss Bernice Gallegher, of Fire Weed, permit me to present Mr. John Childress, of—of Montana."

There seemed nothing to do but offer his hand. The girl took it, but the shake was of the "pump-handle" variety. As soon as possible she broke the clasp. But her eyes remained upon him, puzzled, questioning. The sergeant knew she saw a resemblance to some one in her past life—that she was trying to place him. He breathed a prayer that the change from bright uniform to somber mufti would prove a sufficient disguise.

Had he heard the agent aright, no little illumination had come to the sergeant. "Miss Gallegher, of Fire Weed!" Only a few hours before he had been wondering why this particular section, key to one of the easiest outlets across the international boundary, had not been claimed, either by Gallegher or the Rafter A interests. And now this surprising young woman had been sent to buy it in and had arrived a moment too late!

There was a period of mutual embarrassment. The considerate land agent had turned to some files within the railing. The situation was theirs to do with as they might. But which one of them should open?

Childress felt the danger of those freckle-colored eyes, the freckles of which had escaped his notice that night at the border. Although well trained in the edict of the Mounted—"never fire first"—he

66 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

considered that as applying to gun-fire rather than speech.

"I'm sorry we happened to pick upon the same section, Miss Gallegher," he said. "Of the countless others that are loose in the Dominion, isn't there one that would suit you as well?" With purpose well defined, he changed his voice from normal cadence.

"Beat me to it again," she mourned.

For the first time she laughed, but mirthlessly and without a smile.

"Again?"

"That very same question was on my lips—or just behind them. Isn't there any other section of land in all Canada that would suit *you* as well? If it is humanly possible I must take title to this one back to my father."

There was a troubled, considering quality in her tone; a naive suggestiveness in the lift of her long bronze lashes.

The difficulty of Sergeant Jack was approaching the acute stage. There was no other section of land in all Canada that suited his purpose; yet he could not tell this strangely appealing young creature why this was the key acreage. It was vital that none should know him for what he really was. So clever, so daring had been the operation

of the rustlers of this prize Canadian horse stock that no one could be trusted. He felt the need of verbal fencing now, especially as a possibility that their former meeting might be disclosed to further handicap him.

"How long has your father lived in Fire Weed?" he asked suddenly.

"Ten years. But what has that to do with it?"

"And all these ten years this particular section has been open to purchase. How comes it that you only want it now that someone else does?"

Bernice drew up with scorn, her nose taking an increasingly impertinent tilt. "I can see that it's hopeless to treat with you, but I don't mind answering your question. It was plumb carelessness on our part, once we had enough money to buy it. We thought the Rafter A owned it. Reckon they thought we did. It takes a greener to come along and get at the truth of no-man's land. Now, then, Mr. Childress, will you tell me why you covet this particular gap in our glorious hills?"

Evidently a straight-shooter, this Flame of Fire Weed! She was out with the one question he wished she had not thought to ask. He could not answer in full truth and he doubted that any half measure would satisfy one whose eyes were so discriminating.

68 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"I shall graze some stock," he began lamely.

"Horse or cow?"

"Probably both; and we'll be sort of neighbors, won't we?"

She shrugged her thin young shoulders. "Geographically speaking, yes; but otherwise we're not very neighborly down in Fire Weed, particularly with a man who's going to graze 'probably both.' "

Bernice was turning to leave the office, admitting defeat, but with no quiver of lip.

"Just a moment, Miss Gallegher," he begged, something inside him commanding that he not let her depart in entire despair. After all, he'd only require that section a few months if luck was with him. Evidently she had been sent on the long ride to town to corral the range on some sudden tip that it still was open to purchase. No telling what sort of a father awaited her at the home ranch—perhaps a cross-patch, maybe a tyrant. She needn't go back without some hope, so far as he was concerned. He could promise her something without jeopardizing his mission. For the first time in his bashful life he really wanted to promise a woman something.

For a moment he thought she did not intend to turn back. Although she paused at his suggestion, she kept her eyes fixed upon the stairway.

The sigh with which she at last returned to him might have been from despair, from resignation—what not.

"I just wanted to say," Childress snapped into it before the impulse evaded him, "that I may not like ranching in the Fire Weed. If I find that I don't, or if, for any other reason, I decide to give up my little ranch—the first I've ever owned, by the way—I promise to give you ample advance notice, so that you can, if you like, step into my shoes."

Strangely enough, there was almost venom in the look with which she now studied him. Suddenly a small gasp of intensity quivered through her slender, strong body. Gone was her dreaminess, her resignation or despair.

"I'll promise you, stranger, that you won't like ranching in Fire Weed," she snapped, "but I'll be damned if I'll step into any man's shoes." And with that she was gone.

Childress realized that he had spoken his well-meant offer sadly, yet that scarcely accounted the ill-will of her response. She seemed as sure that he would not enjoy life in the wonderful hills of her home country as if she knew a dozen reasons why. A sudden suspicion caught him. Was it possible that "Pop" Gallegher, her father, was impli-

70 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

cated in the stock stealing which had continued so successfully for more than a year? Was that why he wanted the gap between his own range and the Rafter A—wanted it so badly that he sent his daughter loping to claim it the moment he found it was open to purchase? Never had he seen the parent, but he had heard of him as “hard.” No more could he answer the questions he had put to himself. But they would be answered, these questions, even though he dreaded further contact with the sharp-tongued range nymph who had promised him in turn. Or did he dread this prospect? Thank Heaven she did not connect him with that uniformed knight at the border. Declining to answer even his innermost self, he accepted from the land clerk his documents of title and took himself off to locate, as soon as possible, the “Mountie” constable, assigned to act as his aide in the rôle of ranch hand and instructed to meet him here in Strathconna.

With the sergeant engaged in his search for one of the Force as equally under cover as himself, suppose the scene and setting changed to the handsome home of Major Ivan MacDonald, a rambling stucco structure which with several others, more or less pretentious, occupied the crest of Strathconna’s

only hill. It wasn't a Mount Royal such as Montreal knows, although that was the name they gave it. It wasn't even a Sherbrook Street, this fashion place of the town that wouldn't admit to mushroom growth. But to dwell there was a badge of wealth and the major was keen for badges.

The mansion boasted a spacious dining-room, the walls of which were decorated with superbly mounted heads of animals—elk, buffalo, moose, grizzly and mountain goat—every one of which had fallen under the aim of the old sportsman. He and Fitzrapp were already at table when Ethel Andress breezed in and greeted them cheerfully. Between the two men ensued a friendly competition over which one should have the honor of seating her.

"I tried to have a guest at dinner to-night," remarked the pioneer, as the meal began.

"Who was he, Major?" asked Fitzrapp. "I didn't know there was any visitor worth while in town."

"Worth while?" echoed the old gentleman, with twinkling eyes. "Well, I should say this particular visitor was very much worth while!"

"Quit teasing, uncle," begged Ethel, "and tell us whom you invited."

72 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Your new young man." The pioneer smiled at her.

"My what?"

"Why, the young chap from the States, Mr. Childress, who saved you yesterday from death by the prairie-dog route."

Mrs. Andress gave a slight start of surprise, and the lids narrowed over the turquoise eyes whose contrast with her raven hair formed one of several attractive details that won her class as a beauty. As her uncle had not mentioned the man in khaki after their ride together the day before, she had assumed that the supposed American had not measured up to her relative's standards.

"Out of your own mouth, uncle of mine, you stand convicted of a trifling misstatement," she inserted quickly, by way of covering any undue interest her face might have shown. "Were he my young man, new or old, he wouldn't have refused an invitation to dine here. I'm surprised that this particular individual did refuse, though, for yesterday he looked as hungry as one of the reservation braves. What reason did he give?"

"The best in the world—a previous engagement, both for last night and to-night. Can it be possible, Ethel, that you're losing your knack with strange males? Your fatal beauty——"

An unexplained chuckle from Tom Fitzrapp interrupted.

"Is this some joke you two have framed on poor me?" demanded the widow. "I certainly didn't ask him to rescue me."

"Mr. Thomas Fitzrapp seems to know something about this previous engagement business," suggested the major.

Again Fitzrapp chuckled. "I did run into the spectacular rescuer this afternoon. He was striding around Victoria Park as though he owned the institution, looking wise over the tryouts, and asking all manner of questions about who bred this or that likely one and where they ranged."

"Have any talk with him?" asked MacDonald.

"I didn't speak to him, and if he noticed me at all, I don't believe he remembered me from yesterday. Probably his mental picture-album retained only one face." He glanced jealously at Ethel who had colored slightly under the continuing fire. "I got a hint of the nature of his questions, and as they coincided with certain suspicions that I formed yesterday, I decided to find out what he was up to."

"You followed him?" asked Ethel Address indignantly.

"Yes, I certainly did," returned Fitzrapp bra-

74 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

zenly. "I trailed him to the Chateau Royal. You'll never guess who he met there."

Neither the widow nor her uncle seemed anxious to try, although if they continued to feel disapproval of their ranch manager's action, their faces did not show it.

"That bonfire brat of Gallegher's from down on the range!" exclaimed Fitzrapp with effect.

"Bonfire brat, indeed!" cried Mrs. Address, rising to the defence of her sex. "Shame on you Tom Fitzrapp. It's true that the Gallegher outfit is something of a pest in the Fire Weed, but you needn't forget that Bernice has the instincts of a lady. I'll have an apology in behalf of Mother Eve's whole family."

She received and accepted a makeshift in the form of a "Sorry, Ethel."

"Wonder what Bernice is doing in Strathconna?" the widow mused aloud. "Was she in breeches, Tom?"

Fitzrapp shook his head. "Dress—black dress. Didn't know she could look so pretty, the flame lady from Fire Weed."

"Did he—this Childress person—did he seem very attentive?" Mrs. Address asked, for once forgetting her line.

"Oh, hell!" muttered Fitzrapp.

The old major stepped into the imminent breach.

"You've considerable native shrewdness, Tom, as well as some unreasonable jealousy," he observed. "Outside of his meeting up with Miss Gallegher, what reason can you supply for suspecting a stranger who did us an exceedingly fine turn?"

"Why, partly intuition and partly something tangible," replied the ranch manager, seriously and with seeming frankness. "Did you observe the silver stallion he rode, Major?"

"An exceedingly fine animal, my boy; one I would like to own. What of that?"

The foreman permitted a dramatic pause.

"You are interested in stopping the rustling of Ethel's horses?" came sudden inquiry.

"You know how interested I am. The rustling *must* be stopped! But what is the connection between rustling from the Rafter A and following a hard-riding gent around Strathconna as though he were a criminal?"

"I realize I'm going to make myself unpopular, as you and Ethel both seem fascinated with the chap; but criminal is exactly what I expect this Childress will prove to be. Every time we've had a glimpse of the raiders the leader rode a silver

76 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

stallion. The creamy beast was just such a splendid specimen as this Montana man rides. I mean to learn all I can about him."

"Rubbish!" cried MacDonald warmly. "If he was——"

"That's what I say," interrupted Ethel with considerable scorn, in the use of which she was an expert when the occasion seemed to demand.

"You're forgetting the flame, Bernice," suggested Fitzrapp.

"And I fear you're letting your jealousy of anyone who looks at Ethel run away with you, my dear fellow," chided the pioneer. "*You* forget that the Gallegher outfit has lost stock as well as the Rafter A."

The widow Andress arose from the table with sudden decision. "My mind's made up," she said. "I'm fed up on the bright lights of Strathconna. It's a bit early to quit you, Uncle Ivan, but I'm going back to the ranch Monday. . . . And another thing is settled," she went on after a pause for breath, "the next time there's a raid from the States, I'm going to be in the saddle."

CHAPTER VII.

LAST WARNING.

"IF this ain't one hell of a post for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, may me next assignment be to grub all the worms in Alberta!"

Constable Mahaffy, beginning to be rotund and somewhat wrinkled in his permanently sun-reddened countenance, thought himself alone and was grumbling. This was a luxury in which he never would have indulged himself had he dreamed that Sergt. Jack, his O. C. for the day, month or year, was anywhere within hearing. But his ignorance was bliss, wherefore he continued to unburden his troubled soul to Poison, who feigned to listen and understand with all a hound's artistry.

"Why did they have to wish this on me?" Mahaffy asked the dog. "Me—me, Padraic Mahaffy, the fightingest policer of them great open spaces the writer-people talk about? Or do they call 'em open 'places'?" He growled at the dog and Poison, sympathetic canine, moaned in return.

"This here one sure is open enough," he went

78 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

on with the hound's entire attention. "Not even a roof on the police house, and that a one-room shack with never a sign of a cell. And me playin' at bein' a carpenter. If I'd fallen for workin' with tools, I'd be over in them States makin' ten dollars a day. If I gets any more deals like this on', I'll buy out, be jabers, and I'll——"

From around the corner of the uncompleted cabin came Jack Childress. His appearance, unexpected, sent the one member of his detachment into complete silence.

The sergeant knew Padraic, one of a type of "Mounties" scattered through the Force, invaluable in their way, loyal, fearless in danger, but the sort of trooper who never would rise beyond lowly rank.

"So you're going to buy out, Paddy?" was his questioned greeting. "You're the last real man I'd have expected would leave a buddy cold."

"Don't mind me, Sarg," returned the crestfallen constable. "I was just amusin' the pup here. I'm one of the never-quits, even if I do beef about quit-tin' sometimes."

Childress was as easy going, when in command, as any N. C. O. in the service; he knew, liked and appreciated Paddy Mahaffy; in fact, he had asked to have that particular constable detailed to him

on this Fire Weed case. But it seemed to him that the time had come for a bit of discipline.

"Just what, Pad, is the matter with this as a post of the Royal Mounted?" he demanded with a severity that the constable did not recognize as mock.

"In the first place, Sergeant——" began Mahaffy.

"This, right here, the 'Open A' Ranch of John Childress, Esq., is the first place," cut in the sergeant. "What's the matter with this as a post?"

Thus abruptly deprived of his beloved preambles, the constable literally was driven into the open.

"There's no roof on the post, for onct," he declared.

"And no rain in sight until September—why bother now with a roof? We may not be here when the rain comes."

The Irishman waggled his graying head. "An' as for that, where's there a sign of a uniform on me?"

"The overall and jumper becomes you, Padraic," insisted Childress. "You've got to show more cause than that to have your complaint considered."

"So, then, there's no Union Jack flyin', nor even a flag pole raised, and there's no letters white-

80 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

washed on rocks saying R. C. M. P., and I'm one of the finest whitewashers in the Scarlet."

"Can't you get the idea? This is a secret post—a mufti," Childress tried to explain. "We're under cover. Besides which, and moreover, what possible good could a uniform do you here on the Open A with not a woman in miles?"

The sergeant had put a question the constable might answer.

"Not a woman, is it?" he demanded. "How about the flame filly who's been hoverin' like a firefly about the edges of *our* damn fool ranchlet?"

Here was news to Childress, although he had strong suspicion regarding the identity of the constable's "flame filly." If Bernice Gallegher had been spying the small ranch, he had not even caught enough sight of her to know the color of the pony she rode.

"You never reported her," accused the sergeant, his tone more severe than he usually used to men under his command.

"Nothing to report," countered the rubicund Irisher. "She stayed on her own land, as you mapped it to me on arrival, just as the dinge stayed on hers."

"The dinge?"

"Oh, the black-haired beauty who lives to the east of us. There's been two of them females riding the fences which ain't on this peanut which you say belongs to the Mounted. I'll tell Commissioner Jim, if ever I get before him again, not to send anybody down here without the scarlet."

The sergeant felt no chagrin that he had not sighted the women riders. After making camp, he had taken two trips away to bring in the small stock of horses that was to lend color to his pretense of ranching. Then he had been busy with the construction of what eventually would be a tight little log cabin. Practically all of the patrolling had been done by the constable in the three weeks the two had been on the ranch. Of course, Padraic should have reported both instances, even though there had been no trespass; but then one could not expect perfection from a man who always would be a constable because of the limitations birth had put upon him.

That Childress was personally interested either in the blonde or the brunette neighbor was a possibility that the sergeant cared not to admit even to himself. What had a "Mountie," even a staff-sergeant of the Force, to do with interest in women? The constable could have told him "nawthin'," even though he lived clean, had a tidy

82 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

bit set by in one of the many branches of the Bank of Canada, and possessed a heart big as all outdoors. His lot was to see that the Dominion's police work was well done, wherever and however impossible such work might be.

So he let the belated report of this two-sided feminine inspection pass as a matter of small importance. But instead of going himself, he sent the constable in their spring wagon on a twenty-mile drive to the nearest railroad town for certain supplies of which they stood in need.

"And remember, Padraic, to forget that you've ever had any contact with the Royal Mounted," was the chief's parting instruction. "Don't admit even that you've ever been arrested by one of the Scarlet."

"That I niver have, and ye know the same!" bristled Mahaffy. "Me record's as clean as a hound's tooth. Are there any detachment of us at Beaver Ford?"

"No detachment. Maybe a constable on smuggling duty, but he'll be one of the new rookies and very much in uniform. Small chance of his recognizing an old alderbush like you. If you must talk, talk horse; you just might get a line on something. This case is something like a cat in that there's

no telling which way the darned thing's going to jump."

To prove the sergeant right came another sample of the unexpected less than half an hour after Constable Padraic Mahaffy had driven away from the ranch. The gender of this surprise was feminine and burst, like the flame she was, around a corner of the cabin. Hammering at the task of fitting a mail-order window frame into an opening in the wall of the unroofed structure, Childress had not heard the soft pad-pad approach of her horse.

From his awkward position astride the window opening, he scrambled to a more comfortable one on the prairie turf, his whimsical, one-cornered smile offering greeting the while.

"Welcome to the Open A, Miss Gallegher," he cried with genuine heartiness, confident that having failed to place him that day in Strathconna she never would be able to do so here on his own ranch.

• "To you belongs the distinction of being our first visitor. Drop rein on your cayuse and I'll see what I can supply in the way of a tea party."

Unless he had a poor memory for horseflesh, the so-called cayuse was the same bay that had gone lame crossing "Medicine Line" that first memorable moonlit evening.

"I came for no party—tea or otherwise," she

said, her big freckle eyes bearing steadily upon him and never a trace of smile about the lips which knew no coloring but that of the health which comes from life in the open. "And this hawse is no cayuse," she continued, working backward on the items in his salutation. "Were I a bit more interested, I might be wondering if I really was your *first* visitor. What do you mean by 'Open A'?"

She wore to-day a riding suit of brownish stuff that toned with her uncovered hair as though by a painter's touch. She made no move to accept his invitation to alight, but with her question threw one youthful leg over the horn of her saddle and stared down at him, calculation admixed with interest. The sergeant recognized the worn riding boots that had shown beneath her black skirt that day in Strathconna. To-day, on the range, there was no skirt. After first glance in the great openness of the Fire Weed country, he was inclined to modify his earlier verdict that she "might have been prettier." She looked pretty enough out here on the prairie, hatless, with a complexion which, except for those provocative freckles, seemed to defy the down-blazing sun.

Childress was impressed, although he should not have been. Her refusal to drop rein and 'lite was

a rebuff that approached insult in the etiquette of the Canadian West. However, he answered her question. "Open A is the name of my ranch."

The suggestion of cynicism, noted in town, that seemed so uncharacteristic, returned to her gentle lips and serious eyes.

"You've a nerve to call a single section a ranch," she declared. "But I was asking why the 'Open' and why the 'A'?"

The sergeant told himself that she was more a woman and less a girl than he had thought. He realized that there must be some object other than mere curiosity behind her visit. In several ways the discovery pleased him. With a child, even a child in breeches and perched provocatively upon a horse that was "not a cayuse," he must need be careful. Concerning a woman grown, he need be only polite.

"From the artistry with which you drape your own, I'd imagine you are saddle-wise to brands. 'Open A' happens to be mine. You might call it a 'V' turned upside down. And there probably are some who will say that it is appropriate, as this particular section of your scorn presents an open way to America—the States."

"And the brand itself is not so difficultly different from the Widow Andress' Rafter A," she said

86 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

significantly. "In her brand the 'A' stands on its feet and has a peaked roof over it, which is more than your joke of a cabin boasts. A wise newcomer would have selected a less suggestive letter. I'm glad dad's brand is 'Lazy G,' even though it does seem to put us on our backs."

Her comment, which might be considered "range stuff" of the first order, was the first inkling that had come to him that his selection of a name for his property might be ill-considered. There was a possibility of brand-blotting between "Open A" and "Rafter A." Unlike as sounded the names when spoken, the plucking of some hair could lead to interesting possibilities. Already Flame Gallagher had grasped this fact, it seemed.

Already she was suspicious, but not, love the King! along the line of his real identity which must have disclosed, prematurely, the reason for his being in Fire Weed.

"Meaning just what—your 'brand not so differently different'?" he demanded in self-defence.

"Meaning that I rode in here to-day to give you one last warning," she returned, the freckle-eyes flashing, as her long, slim fingers threw back her flagrant hair.

"You've heard of brand-blotting," she went on. "Well, the boys of the range have figured out sev-

eral brands that could, with skill, be blotted into your 'Open A.' It's evident that you don't mean to settle down as a granger; that you can make a living here raising stock on a single section is an obvious impossibility. The answer seems plain."

"To you?" he asked with a sudden show of concern. His interest was growing in this vivid young witch of the Fire Weed whose nose was bridged with freckles and whose verbal fire was as straight as the leaden one of his own Colts. He disliked the idea that she should think him a horse thief, even though that rôle was behind his taking root on the little gateway ranch. And how much easier the situation must have become had he dared remind her that once, not long since, he first had met her fleeing a horse-thief charge!

The girl did not answer at once. But there was a rather cynical twist to her lips as she arranged herself into a more comfortable seat on her over-large stock saddle.

"It don't matter what Flame Gallegher thinks," she remarked with more deliberation than was her wont. "I'll confess to an honest-to-goodness liking for you, Mr. Childress. Not one of those first-sight affairs, but just a man-to-man regard that ——" She broke off suddenly. The suggestion of cynicism, that seemed so uncharacteristic, was

88 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

forced back to her gentle lips and serious eyes. "Hell's bells!" she chided herself. "I'm getting kittenish in my old age. What I came to tell you and what I now do tell you, so help me God, is that if you or any one else cares a darn for the integrity of your hide, stranger, you'd better get it out of here. The boys have made up their mind to 'liminate you. And that's the warning I came to deliver. Take it or leave it."

He was forced to smile at her "in my old age" remark. If she "aged" more than twenty-two he was a poor guesser. As for being "kittenish," he almost wished she had been.

"They sent you—the eliminating boys?" he asked.

"I'm not the sort to be sent, as you'd realize if you weren't such a greener with women."

"Then what's the real motive behind to-day's overture? Greener that I am, I'll venture realizing that you did not do it as a trick to get me off this section. And I'm not conceited enough to hope that you rode here out of pity for me. Then—why the warning?"

"You're right on a couple of counts," she slashed back. "I'd not have bothered had it been only your beating me out by a nose at the railroad land-office.

And there isn't a reason in the world why I should bother about you. But my father——"

"So, your father——"

"Can't abide rustlers or the suspicion of the same," she went on with more warmth than had heated her earlier speech. "He's more hot-headed than his daughter. Liable to shoot somebody and get himself nearly shot-up or in trouble with those pesky Mounted Police. I don't want him to need standing trial if a warning in time can eliminate trouble. I wish you'd mount your wonder horse and ride right out of the picture. If our outfit don't get you, the Rafter A will. They're riding herd on you, as close as we are. I've seen it myself. You haven't a chance to get away with anything less than murder, and you don't look exactly like a——a——"

He smiled at her that whimsical grin that had carried him in and out of so many tight holes. At last he was positively sure that she had not connected him with the Scarlet of that border night when she had disobeyed his gruff orders so flagrantly. It was "the man of it" that he couldn't look behind the woman mask and know the truth. As for himself he might have made anonymity's riddle—but how did he expect to get away unremembered with a horse like Silver and Poison, the dog?

90 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Go on and say it—I don't look like a murderer," he urged. "You can't realize how you've disappointed me in having only a filial object for this visit. I'll think over the warning and ride to report after due consideration."

"At your own risk if that horse of yours ever puts hoof on the Gallegher Ranch!" she exclaimed.

If the prairie had not been dustless, he could not have seen her for "smoke."

CHAPTER VIII.

THREAT OF DOUBT.

THE Ethel Address who rode this spring afternoon over the rolling prairie west of Witch River and the Rafter A home ranch was decidedly a different-looking being from the one who had romped headlong over the Whitefoot reservation a few weeks earlier into John Childress's rescue clutch. Her mount was a gaited mustang, vividly piebald in black and white, but scrubby in comparison with Princess, the sorrel thoroughbred, who remained in the stables back of the Strathconna town house. The English saddle which had won the sergeant's condemnation, had been supplanted by a seat of the "cow" variety.

Her black hair, which on that other occasion had streamed outrageously, to-day was concealed under a big, face-shading hat. Instead of a riding habit of the fashionable cut known to Ottawa tailors, she wore short-wool chaps over khaki breeches that clung to her knees and ballooned at her surprisingly shapely hips. A shirt of blue flannel,

92 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

decorated with pearl buttons, and a loosely knotted silk neckerchief completed her costume.

Although at open-country running, the piebald mustang could have given fair Princess an even break, the young woman was satisfied to have the wiry little beast jog along at a fox trot, that easiest of gaits, which both rider and horse can endure for hours without fatigue. The widow had no definite destination and the easy pace suited her mood, which was one of mental readjustment.

What was she going to do with and about Tom Fitzrapp?

Since their sudden return to the ranch from Strathconna there had been several happenings. One had to do with further loss to the rustlers, duly reported to the fair owner after Fitzrapp's return from his first inspection ride over the lower ranch of the several that made up the Rafter holdings.

"How deep did they gouge us this time?" she had asked.

"Without making a count, I say in the neighborhood of fifty head," Fitzrapp had returned despondently. "But I nearly got them this time."

He had tossed his flat-brimmed felt hat to the girl. Through the peaked crown of it a rifle bullet had bored a hole.


"If it had been an inch lower——" he had started on.

But she had held the far-away look in her dark eyes and continued gazing out over the valley. Too many times it had been nearly or almost. And Fitzrapp had reported too many narrow escapes.

The explosion had come later—the next morning. The handsome ranch manager had renewed his importunities that she forsake widowhood and become Mrs. Fitzrapp. When she had shown small—possibly less than usual—interest in his protestations of devotion, he had gone off in a huff to the corrals. At luncheon, for the Rafter A was the one ranch in the Fire Weed country at which dinner was served at night, he suggested an intention of running up to Strathconna for a horse race in which he was interested.

"If you go now, Tom," she had said, "you needn't bother coming back. I'd hate to see you killed on our range and, from past experiences, they seem more likely to get you than you to get any of them. Why don't you bring down a rustler now and then?"

Her uncle had been quick to Fitzrapp's defence. Rifles had a certain range of fire, and Tom never had been near enough, any more than had any of the rest of the outfit. She had better let him have



94 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

a few days off and come back primed for the next raid.

But Fitzrapp had seen the danger flash in his employer's eyes. He had voiced a quiet, white-faced decision to remain on the range. Without the use of words, which would have been useless at the moment, he tried to tell her with his eyes that he was remaining to redeem himself.

As the piebald hoofed the prairie, up one roll of sward and down another, across a patch of the worthless fire weed from which the region took its name and over a more bountiful one of buffalo and grama grasses which made it valuable for grazing, Ethel Andress pondered a plan of her own. She had ridden many a mile working it out on other days. This plan in short was to bait the lower range—that nearest the international border—with her finest stock, enlist a band of gun-fighters, and, with herself in command, await the raid that she was certain would follow. The more she thought of this baited-trap idea the better she liked it.

But the particular object of her present sortie on horseback was that she might make up her mind regarding one Thomas Fitzrapp. For years, since childhood, in fact, it had been her habit to take to the saddle and the open range when serious prob-

lems of life required adjustment. It was on one such wild ride that she had decided to link her fortunes with Cliff Andress, only to have him respond to the Empire's call so soon afterward that she could scarcely realize they ever had been married. And almost as soon as he could cross the Atlantic, do a bit of training in England and get over to Flanders, she had found herself a widow.

There seemed no doubt about Fitzrapp's interest. It had been as gentle as a mother's in the first tragic days. Once taken on to manage the ranch he had behaved beyond question until the raids on the Rafter A beauties began. Since, she had wondered why he always got shot at and never seemed to shoot back, just as she could not understand why Fitzrapp, graduate of Sandhurst, had been unable to see service when every able-bodied citizen in Canada was up and ready to go. True, he had done excellent work training recruits at one of the big camps outside Quebec, but—— There was that big BUT!

Ethel had just been emerging from widowhood at the time of his arrival on the ranch which she had been forced to take over. At once he had become an admirer. This devotion had endured and strengthened with the years, so that, although she

96 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

often laughed at it, she had grown to rely upon it as well as to feel flattered about it.

A man of Fitzrapp's education and experience was rare in her social life. His easy manner gave him an appeal that other men of her somewhat limited acquaintance lacked. Although not positively handsome, as was her uncle, considering his age, Thomas Fitzrapp had a commanding presence, and expressive, deep-set brown eyes. Growing into womanhood, she had become more certain of her admirer's personal value, and, by comparison with other men, found in him graces that compelled her appreciative consideration.

Under the circumstances Blackandwhite, the cayuse, was left largely to his own devices, which, in this instance, considered only setting his own pace and "boxing" his own compass. The widow, concerned with her mental inquest on the suitor who had disappointed about the raid, continued that investigation of herself and of him.

Certainly Tom Fitzrapp always had been most kind to her; tolerant of her whims, which she knew had been many; considerate of her feelings, which were not near the surface, and respectful toward her opinions, which were decided.

The pronounced fault of jealousy which Fitzrapp lately had developed pleased more than it

annoyed her. When brought to task for this, he always assured her that it would disappear once she had given him an affirmative answer to his persisting question. But this answer she postponed, keeping him in the equivocal position of being neither refused nor accepted. Most men would have considered this treatment unfair. Under the circumstances, she was impressed by his personal optimism.

On various counts in the past she had been impatient with Tom Fitzrapp, but these had been trivial. This afternoon she could not be cheerful, feeling a real disappointment—the disappointment that had forced her drastic action of “either go to your horse race in Strathconna and don’t come back, or stay here and help capture these pesky bandits.”

Still rankled in her mind the ranch manager’s lack of courage in this latest brush with the rustlers. It would have required more than a bullet hole in her hat to stop the widow, had she found herself within gun range of the thieves. Had Tom come home with a broken shoulder, or even a clipped ear, her temper would have been more tolerant. As it was he was nearly out of the ranch romance, so far as she was concerned.

Just then the piebald took a hand—just as she

98 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

was about to tell all the Fire Weed world what she thought of Mr. Thomas Fitzrapp. The horse stopped and pawed the ground with his right forefoot, as if the shoe hurt him, then turned around in inquiry.

"My goodness, hawse, I believe you've an inkling what I've been thinking about all this ride. What's the answer?"

Ethel Andress looked into the horse's eyes, but saw that they held no fear, although she knew that the eyes of a horse reflect more of alarm than do those of a dog when alarm there is. "What do you want me to look at?" she asked the beast companionably.

The answer was down in the cup of the hills—that most beautiful stallion she ever had seen. Her filly had told her something and something she was not ready to meet. But the decision was taken out of her hands. The silver beast had issued his call and there was no human woman powerful enough to keep the equine twain apart. Ethel knew when she had lost control of her mount and this time she had. Eventually the piebald would descend into the cup, carrying her to a second meeting with the mysterious man from the States, that is unless he had sold the pride and joy of his heart.

But for the moment she was able to postpone the descent. She realized that she had ridden across the range and to the edge of the low bluff upon which the railroad surveyors had put their brand and where any time now the wire fences of settlers might be found. Anything but a happy thought—settlers and wire fences—to a stock woman!

Looking down at the foot of the bluff, she made a startling discovery. Settlers must have come already! Else what was the meaning of that rough log shelter that was rising just below her stand on the bank of a small creek; of the canvas corral and the presence of a small band of horses grazing as peacefully as though they were at home there? Nothing of the sort had she noticed on her previous rides that Spring about the edge of the cup.

"Looks like the end of the range," she predicted dismally. And to think that the rescuer who had intrigued her, the handsome and strangely reserved American should lead the invasion so long predicted by her own uncle and echoed by the gentleman who had been her husband!

She looked again at the animal picketed near the half-complete cabin. Undoubtedly it was the silver stallion she had ridden in her final spurt to be first at the death of the coyote hunt. There was

no mistaking the neck arching gracefully from oblique shoulders, the superb carriage of the head without breaking the line of curvature from withers to foretop; the round barrel that carried full back to the hips, and the full sweep of the high-carried tail. She looked with eyes trained to equine appraisal, and had not the slightest doubt of her recognition.

Two men left the unroofed cabin as she watched, and walked toward the corral, the smaller carrying a saddle and bridle. The taller one, who walked with a long stride and played with the loop of his rope she saw at a glance was Childress who should have been anywhere else but there on the border range, unless——

Remembrance gripped her. Fitzrapp had seen him in Strathconna with Flame Gallegher. This cup which he seemed to have occupied, was a buffer between the Rafter A and the Gallegher ranch. What was the connection? Tom suspected the owner of the silver horse to be leader of the rustlers; could it be possible that the Galleghers were concerned in the stealing and that the man who called himself Childress was there at Gallegher instigation? Until that moment she had held Fitzrapp's reiterated suspicions as groundless and merely an outgrowth of his own jealousy. Was it

possible that Tom was right and that this up-standing young American who said he had come from Montana really was the head of the rustling band? If so, he could scarcely have found a likelier place as a base of operations.

Claim to a ranchhold there would be a reasonable excuse for his presence on the range; the location offered every opportunity for spying on the Rafter horse bands and a ready refuge in case raiding plans miscarried. What a discovery she had stumbled upon! And what fools they had been, they of the Rafter outfit, not to have learned that this particular section was open to purchase from the railroad people!

Ethel watched the men as they crossed to the corral, her mind still busy with this new problem. She knew that a canvas corral was impenetrable to the most obstinate outlaw, and was the best fence for breaking purposes. Even before the pair entered the enclosure, she suspected what was on hand—that the roan beast, moving so restlessly inside, was going to feel saddle girths, possibly for the first time.

Mrs. Andress was in doubt as to her immediate course. Had she been convinced that Childress was the rustler Fitzrapp believed him to be, she would have hurried away to round up her outfit

and give the battle in which she longed to be a participant. But she had no proof of his guilt, and could take no definite action on mere suspicion.

Then she remembered Childress's frank-looking eyes and his resourcefulness when he thought her in danger that morning on the Indian reservation, and she knew that she was far from convinced. Horse-thieves might not look the part, as the men of Rafter A agreed, but she felt that Childress could not act such a rôle. A desire to see him and talk to him grew upon her, and finally won her decision. She'd yield to the filly, which probably would have thrown her and gone for a visit to the silver beast whether or no.

She would ride down to the canvas corral, and if the stranger confirmed her first impression, she would warn him of the danger that hung over anyone under suspicion in the vicinity of the Fire Weed range. Indeed, she was not certain but that she would warn him of peril in any event. If he was a rustler, and she succeeded in frightening him away, the result would be the same as though she and her outfit fought him off. Danger would be spared them both, and she felt that she owed him something for his intentions up at White-foot.

For just a moment she wavered, remembering

what Fitzrapp had reported seeing at the Chateau Royal. She had no love to lose for the Gallegher girl. But she banished the thought as utterly outside the question, so far as she was concerned. She would warn him; but first, from this reserved seat on the bald bluff, after restraining her mount, she would see how he handled a recalcitrant horse.

CHAPTER IX.

BUST 'EM, BRONCO.

BOTH Childress and the man with him entered the corral, crawling under the canvas without regard for dignity. The rope fell true at first cast, and the roan was soon in hand and blindfolded for the saddling, which was accomplished without throwing, despite vigorous protests from the animal.

The widow could see that the horse was of mixed breed, which is likely to produce the worst buckers. It was evident, too, that he had been saddled before, so that it was safe to set him down as an outlaw who would not stay "broke." It was exactly the sort of proposition a man of Childress' daring and strength would enjoy tackling, thought Ethel, as she quieted the filly and settled back into her comfortable saddle to watch every move in the battle for supremacy which she felt certain would be worth while.

The roan snorted a note of defiance as Childress on the nigh side, hung his stirrup for a quick mount. The widow saw him run his hand over the saddle,

give the cloth a tug to assure himself that it was well set, and pull the cinch a couple of holes tighter for luck. The horse stood still, his hind legs well under him, his head, with ears flattened, sinking lower and lower, his tail between his legs.

Seizing the checkstraps of the bridle in his left hand, and taking a firm grip upon the pommel with his right, Childress thrust his boot into the iron stirrup and swung easily to the saddle. They were off, quite as though the outlaw had been a trained actor and had heard his cue.

Squealing and bawling like a mad thing, the horse made a frantic rush for the far side of the corral, pounding the hard ground with his hoofs. As the stretch of canvas loomed up before his eyes, a more impenetrable barrier than a stockade of wood, the beast pulled up with a stop that must have thrown a less expert rider. There followed a spasm of twisting, turning, and bucking in circles, through which the man remained seated, as though a leather part of the ponderous saddle.

"That nag's a sunfisher!" Ethel murmured, as the bronco repeatedly leaped into the air, trying to twist his rider from his back. "And that man Childress is *some* rider!" His horsemanship was superb.

A cry of alarm escaped her lips as the horse,

maddened by the failure of his previous efforts, deliberately reared and threw himself down backward. But her concern for Childress' safety proved uncalled for. At exactly the right second he slipped from under, saving himself, evidently, from even a bruise. As the surprised horse scrambled to his feet, the man flung himself back into the saddle, where he sat prepared for the next series.

Then, after several minutes of further fighting, Ethel saw Childress go hurdling over the roan's head, but only to land on his feet a dozen yards in front. She knew by the ease with which he alighted that he had not been thrown actually, but used a trick of dismounting known to the most skilled "busters," usually resorted to when the rider is tired and the outlaw not yet unwound.

"Whatever else you may be, John Childress," she commented to herself, "you are certainly a past master of busting a bronc!"

She gave the restless pony rein and sat her with skill on a slide down the slanting face of the bluff. Cantering across the meadow toward the corral, she pulled up outside the canvas before Childress was aware of her approach.

"May I congratulate you on a most finished performance, Mr. Childress?" she called.

One amazed glance brought recognition, and he strode across the corral toward her.

She had a moment to study him in the undress of range garb. His silk neckerchief hung like a bib over his gray shirt; a strap supported his corduroy trousers; and these, in turn, tucked into boots with high heels and short vamps. His head wore no covering. First the lower part of his face held her attention, its determined chin and elongated upper lip, with no red showing, striking her as unusual. She realized now that she had not really looked at the man that day on the reservation. But, as he drew nearer, his eyes held her, eyes full of merriment; while the smile on his face bespoke a welcome that she scarcely had expected.

"A sure-enough surprise, Mrs. Address," he said, as he neared the canvas wall. "Wasn't expecting company this afternoon, so you'll have to excuse the workaday rig. I've been some engaged these last few minutes. Have you been here long?"

"I watched your—your engagement from the bluff yonder," the widow returned with an over-shoulder gesture. "What did you think you were doing? Not going into the Wild West show business, I hope?"

"I was trying to convince that young tornado over there that he just *thinks* he's an outlaw."

Childress broadened his smile. "But he seems to have a single-track mind, and it's going to take several treatments."

Neglecting to leave the corral as he had entered^d crawling, the sergeant walked slowly toward the gate, the widow on the pony keeping pace with him outside.

"Our trails seem bound to cross in unexpected places," she observed by way of giving him an opening. "I was sorry that you could not accept my uncle's invitation to dine with us in Strathconna."

"Acceptance happened to be impossible," said he quickly. "I was sorry not to have seen you again, but there were compensations."

"The Gallegher brat," thought the widow, but said not a word.

"I had hoped to run across you people down here, but scarcely so soon," he went on. "I've just driven in."

So he was aware of the fact that he was on the edge of the Rafter A range, thought Ethel. And he had hoped to run across them! If this stranger was what Tom Fitzrapp suspected, certainly he was brazen enough.

She decided further probe would be advisable. "Do you expect to camp here long?" she asked.

Childress smiled at her over the improvised gate. "I'm not camping, Mrs. Andress, though it may look that way. This is my ranch—six hundred and forty acres—so long as I keep my contract with the railroad, and I reckon I'll be able to keep it unless the bottom falls out of the horse market."

Her eyes widened with surprise at this statement. "You're going to become a Canadian?"

Childress could not tell her that he was Canadian born, any more than he could explain his lack of uniform. He was there in the Fire Weed country particularly to solve her losses of stock, although other breeders had lost in lesser degree. She was the sort of woman to whom a real man does not care to lie. There was a "white" way out.

"Possibly I can make a go of this proposition," he answered, ignoring the question of nationality. "You've heard of the rolling stone and its lack of moss. Well, I've proven to my own satisfaction that there is truth in the adage. At least temporarily, I've quit hitting strange trails."

Looking across the canvas into the corral, Ethel noticed that the other man who was short and stout and wore a bristling red mustache, had unsaddled the roan and was in the act of crawling under the improvised fence on the opposite side.

110 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Who's that?" she asked with a gesture a trifle disdainful.

Childress looked, saw the effort to escape, and suppressed a chuckle. "That's Padraic Mahaffy, my outfit. He's sort of woman-shy, which accounts for the get-away."

The widow felt her suspicions returning. Under all the circumstances, the wrangler might have another reason for being shy of any one from the Rafter A.

"You're a bit shy yourself, aren't you?" she asked. "I remember that although my uncle offered you the choice of evenings that time in Strathconna, you were not in the least hungry."

"That situation was beyond my control—my small experience with women had nothing to do with refusing to dine with you. And right now, won't you dismount and rest a bit? I can't offer much in the way of hospitality, but such as we have is yours."

"I'm quite comfortable in the saddle, thank you, and I have but a moment," she said. "Do you think, Mr. Childress, that you've done wisely settling in this particular basin? There is no open range near here, and——"

"Oh, I'm going in for intensified breeding," said Childress, as Ethel paused, "if I may use an ad-

jective which the farmer seems to have preempted. I'll fence in my section presently and attempt only the raising and training of thoroughbreds. There's still a good market for the right sort of horses on both sides of the line."

"But I was speaking of this particular section," she continued gravely. "You know the situation here—the trouble we've been having on Fire Weed range."

"With the rustlers?" he suggested.

She affirmed with a nod and had a thought of admiration for his cool manner under her significant gaze.

"They had better not trouble me," he declared, his lean face going suddenly grave. "I have the advantage over range breeding and grazing. Here, my stock will be always under my eye, and there'll be no stampeding it without my knowledge. If the rustlers persist in coming—well, Mrs. Andress, a man has the right to protect his own property, even to the extent of drawing a gun and using it. You wouldn't hesitate, yourself, would you?"

Either this was pure effrontery, coupled with finished acting, or it was the speech of an honest man. The widow was unable to determine which, but either, it left her more eager to warn him. If he was a rustler chief, she would serve her own

interests could she persuade him to leave the vantage point of the ranch in the basin. If he was innocent, she would repay her small debt to him by warning him of a danger which he doubtless underestimated.

At that moment old Poison came bounding up to them, evidently returned from some hunting expedition of his own. She envied the hound the confidence he was able to throw into his greeting and the honest affection with which he attempted to paw his master. Then the dog turned his attention to her, evidently fixing her identity with one preliminary sniff. He essayed to lick her hand with a series of eager leaps which set the mustang cavorting and stamping her feet.

"Down, you old pest!" Childress ordered. "Down, I say! Go over and tell Mahaffy to spare you some of his feminine shyness."

The dog seemed to understand. At any rate, he started off on a run, seeking the wrangler, who could be seen some distance up the creek.

"Poison seems to remember me, even though our meeting was single and brief," said Mrs. Andress.

"He does," returned Childress, smiling, "and he has a wonderful talent for forgetting people he don't like."

In the face of these pleasantries, it was not easy to return to the subject uppermost in her mind, but she forced herself to do so. "I was thinking rather of the danger to yourself than of the loss of your stock. I suffered another raid within the week. My uncle and Mr. Fitzrapp, my ranch manager, are greatly aroused and intent upon extreme measures. Naturally, any stranger in this section comes under suspicion. If by any chance indiscretion"—for some reason she found herself stating the situation more delicately than she had intended—"if you should be found in any position that was considered incriminating, I hate to think what might happen. I wish you hadn't come here, for really it is not safe. Won't you drive on—make wagon tracks to some other location?"

He was gazing at her in seeming incredulity. "Your uncle will scarcely suspect me, Mrs. Andress."

"But already you are suspected!" she cried. "You and your silver stallion there. In most of the raids such a horse has figured, and there is not a doubt but that the rustlers came from across the border. I don't want to see more trouble started, but there surely will be more if Mr. Fitzrapp learns that you have camped here."

"Oh, Tom Fitzrapp!" The exclamation seemed

to escape from reluctant lips and not without a tinge of scorn.

His eyes were directed toward the ground now. His whole attitude was one of consideration. But this lasted only for a moment. His confident, attractive smile was again on his face when he looked up at her. Before he spoke, she knew that her persuasive effort had been in vain.

"It's mighty good of you to ride over and tell me this," he said, "but I reckon I'll have to stick it out. I've been suspected before—that is, deeds that were not pleasant to consider have been attributed to me, and on stronger circumstantial evidence than the ownership of a gray stallion. However, I have an equity in this land, the first I've ever owned, and I hope I know how to defend my own. I want to stay here, Mrs. Andress; I want to help clear the Fire Weed of rustlers. I had in mind making you folks a call and establishing neighborly relations, but from what you say the effort would be useless. You are welcome here at any time, and so is your uncle. If you need an extra gun, you've only to call for the best action I can get out of mine. Perhaps the day will come when—when we can all be friends."

His manner was at once hesitating and hopeful.

The widow felt a return of her former per-

plexity regarding the man. Fitzrapp suspected him, and here he was, neatly holed in with the skeleton of a horse band on the edge of their range, and here he said he intended to stay. Appearances certainly were against him and corrective action seemed beyond her power. If he was the rustler chief, his safety lay in Fitzrapp's timidity—his fear to get within target range. She hoped that it would not fall to her lot, suspicion against John Childress verified, to have to bring him down with her own gun. That he'd be very careful not to shoot a woman she felt convinced. That was his handicap and an added reason why he should have accepted warning.

She gathered up the reins and turned her piebald. "Remember that I told you the danger of remaining," she said quietly. "I've miles to ride and must be off."

"Sorry you should consider a warning necessary," he returned. "Life down here in Fire Weed may not be as dull as one might suspect from the stage setting. But I'm grateful for your notice-to-leave, even though I must disregard it. Good-by."

When Ethel Andress gained the top of the bluff, she looked back and saw him engaged in some sort of a rough-and-tumble game with Poison. Evidently as a bugaboo she was a decided failure.

116 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Anyway, she had done her best, and they were quits.

As she gave the pony his head for the home ranch, she did not notice a mounted figure that emerged from a thicket farther up the bluff and started on a circular course in the same general direction. The question of honesty set aside, her mind became engaged in a comparison of the two men most in her thoughts. It had been hard to choose the man whose name she wore. This second choice, which now seemed just around the corner, promised to be more difficult. "Why," she asked herself—"why do they put such a weight of weeds on widows?" Then she remembered that report of Fitzrapp's about Childress' meeting with the "Gallegher brat" and felt somewhat cheered. This horse thief suspect wasn't worth any woman's worry.

CHAPTER X.

HOME OF FLAME.

THE range was a study in green and yellow this day that Sergeant Jack Childress set out, despite warning, to ride to the home of the Flame. The visit was part of the program he had mapped for himself—an intensive and personal study of all resident ranchers in the hope that something might “drop” to show collusion, if such existed, in the mystery of the “lifted” horse bands. Silver, the magnificent, snorted at part of the going, that which lay through the weed no animal is known to eat, even under the most pressing conditions.

Of this little green plant there was enough in evidence to give name to the range, but it served rather as a frame to rich growths of buffalo and other grasses. Had it been everywhere, the stockmen would have foraged somewhere else.

Other names has this parasite—snakeweed, turpentine weed and, to the scientist, *Guttierrazia*. It generally grows to a height of ten inches, and is a bushy plant with small yellow flowers, never red ones. The colorful name of fireweed comes from

the fact that in the winter the plant dries and the flowers bear little white seeds filled with a resinous substance which makes it burn like tinder.

With eyes accustomed to the wonders of the sub-Arctic, the "bark" of sun dogs and the colorful sheen of Northern Lights, the "Mountie" paid little attention to this comparatively drab scenery. He did make note that he was near the undrawn line which, with occasional "monuments" of stone, marks the boundary between the Dominion and the States. It occurred to him as strange that the fireweed stopped on the side of the beaver and that the timber began on the leagues of the eagle. He had foraged into that American forest for logs with which to build the walls of the shack that Mahaffy resented as no post for even a sergeant-constable detachment of the Royal Mounted. And he realized the possibilities of concealment and cover that lay among the pines for the pestiferous stock-raiding gang. He intended to go there again and for more than timber, unless the rustlers earlier came to him. But he was not hurrying that or any other detail of this run-'em-down game to which he had been particularly assigned. Hurried raids on both sides of the border had in the past failed signally, netted no prisoners and stopped not a drop of the leakage from Canadian ranches. His

plan of campaign was slow in its tempo, but he hoped it would be sure. That it might be dangerous to the official pair engaged in it was not worth consideration; assignments in the service which were not dangerous were hopelessly monotonous, as he well could testify.

On the farther side of a long roll of prairie, he rode into a marshy section unusual to the region. It was one that would have required the services of "bog riders," from March until the end of May when cows are weak, had the range been devoted to cattle. But the sergeant was sure that he was on the Gallegher ranch which, like the Rafter A, specialized in horses whose sense of danger is so acute as to make it unnecessary to guard them from quicksand danger. It was with surprise, therefore, that he sighted presently a lone puncher trying to drag a bogged-down cow to safety. With the idea of aiding the Samaritan of the Plains, he changed his course and put Silver into a gallop.

While still some distance away he recognized the bog-rider as Flame Gallegher, and on approach saw that she had her rope around a situation that was somewhat beyond her.

"Hold up a moment, Miss Gallegher," he called. "You'll break that cow's neck before you get her out that way."

Evidently she had been so intent upon her rescue work that she had not heard the approach, the stallion's hoofs padding softly upon the buffalo turf. She checked her cayuse and looked up, flushing vividly on recognition.

"You!" she cried. "You and the silver beast riding our range in broad daylight?"

"Why not?" he asked. "My visit is friendly enough. Merely a get-acquainted call upon your father."

"But I warned you not——" she began.

Childress ignored her frown. "Let's see what we have here. Perhaps the committee of two from the Open A can help along your work of mercy."

Evidently the cow had gone into the quicksand bog to drink, burdened herself with several gallons of water and found her feet fast in the grip of the sand. She was well down and thoroughly frightened, the suction holding the feet as if in a vise. The girl had her rope about the beast's horns, with the other end attached to saddle horn. She was attempting salvage by a straight-pull method, but so far with nothing more in the way of success than bellows of pain from the bogged one.

"She's in a bad way," said the sergeant with experience as his authority. "I'll have to go in after the beast."

He dismounted, dropping rein on Silver. Squatting on the solid prairie that edged the bog, he unlaced his boots and rolled his trousers above his knees. This last process was applied to the sleeves of his flannel shirt.

"I don't suppose you carry a shovel," he remarked. "All bog-riders should."

"I'm not a bog-rider," she flared. "I was out gunning for horse thieves and happened on this poor critter. She happens to wear my own personal and private brand—Circle G—but I'd have tried to save her even had she worn an Open A."

Childress shrugged competent shoulders. "So, Flame of Fire Weed is also humane," he remarked, offering her again that whimsical smile that invited her own lips even as she resented the assurance of it.

"Did you imagine for a moment I wasn't human?" she demanded indignantly.

"I merely remarked your *humaneness*," he said to set himself right with her, and he started to wade into the bog.

"Have a care, man!" she cried. "Some of these bogs are sure enough sink-holes. They'll swallow people as well as cattle. This fool cow isn't worth the risk. Besides, I haven't another rope to put around your neck."

"Glad you didn't say 'horns,' Miss Flame. Although I'll guess you're not certain that I don't deserve a rope around me—my neck. Your interest in me shows that I should have said that the lady was merciful. Don't worry. I'm only going to dig out and loosen her forefeet with my hands; then I'll lift and boost while you and the cayuse pull on the rope. Perhaps, between us, we can work her to the bank."

The task of mercy to which he had assigned himself was hard and disagreeable, but he persisted. And the Fire Flame girl lent expert aid in her management of her mount. Between them, they did drag the "fool cow" to firm ground. There, Childress tailed her up and got her to her feet, too dazed from her experience even to bellow her resentment for treatment that she did not understand.

"Bet she does not live to raise her calf," remarked the girl owner of the bovine in question.

"One out of five does," was all the reassurance Childress could offer. "Maybe she's the lucky fifth."

Flame Gallagher nodded her agreement with this adage of the range. "Bog-riding isn't profitable to us cowmen," she said, "but it seems too dreadful to let them die in the water without at

least trying to do something for them. I'm greatly obliged, Mr. Childress. Never could have dragged her out without help."

The reason he suddenly stopped lacing his boot was because, all at once, she smiled at him. Slowly, delightfully, the smile started in an unsuspected dimple in one cheek, parted her ripe lips over teeth of dazzling whiteness, lit her whole face like a glory of electricity after twilight in a room. Never, the "Mountie" assured himself, had he seen so luring a smile. And her voice, when she spoke to him thus directly, had the appealing vibration of a cello string.

"If you think you must meet my dad and the outfit," she said, "I'll show you the way."

His hat was off, as due the best moment of their acquaintance. But he found himself, as they rode westward together, mentally assorting reasons—possible reasons—for the two warnings that had come to him. After all, there was some recompense to the Arctic patrol; one did not have two fair women to worry about up there where the igloo belles were greasy with blubber and reeked with the odor of dried fish. At that, so long as he might occasionally draw forth that dimpled smile, he'd never ask Commissioner Jim to send him back to the Frozen North.

But their ride together this glorious afternoon had rude interruption, and that, alack, just as the two were beginning to feel the getting-acquainted thrill of this third contact. In one way—possibly two ways—it was unfortunate that the sergeant's roving eyes were attracted by a pair of buzzards cutting the blue a mile or so to the right of their direct course to the Gallagher home ranch. To him the slow-winged spirals of these black scavengers of the air signified that they were flying a death watch over man or beast in trouble and nearing the end. Professional instinct and training dictated a detour that he might determine who or what had attracted the attention of the hawks.

"I'll breeze over and see what it is those birds are about to hold a wake on," he suggested. "If you please, ride ahead and I'll overtake you when I've learned."

But Flame demurred. She would ride with him, her curiosity as well founded as his own. There was, it seemed, a cut-off trail in that direction which they could take that would bring them to the ranch-house as quickly as the track they were following.

Feeling that he still was under suspicion, Childress acquiesced; but a moment later had reason to regret that he had not insisted on his original proposition. The scene which they rode down

upon was too horrible for freckled eyes to gaze upon, even though the owner was prairie-bred and hardened to the tragedies of the range. From his vantage of saddle seat upon a higher horse and his own greater height, he determined the situation before it came within her range of vision. Used as he was to horrors of the wild, the mere thought of what lay before them sickened him. Again he tried to spare her.

"You'd best not come any further, Miss Gallegher," he suggested, drawing rein. "I can attend to whatever is to be done."

"I'm no parlor pet," she declared. "I'm used to being in at the finish of anything that happens on this ranch. Ride on!"

This was one occasion when even a Russian realist well might spare the details. In the out-of-way bog hole lay a steer, its hide peeled from its back down to the mud-line, and *still alive!* The proof of the last was evident to both in the moving eyes and gritting teeth of the helpless, hopelessly tortured beast.

"Injin stuff," he muttered. "The fiends!"

"Some wandering Sioux from over the line wanting hides for moccasin soles," she amplified. "We caught a pair once red-handed and sent them up for killing live stock unlawfully. Now the reds try

to escape by skinning the boggies alive. It was fear of something like this that brought me out to-day."

"One minute," said Childress with quick decision.

His revolver was out and a mercy-shot sounded. The steer was out of its misery.

"Thank you," breathed Flame who had turned away, her eyes searching the prairie. "If I could throw a sight on the brute who did that horror, there'd be a dead——"

"Let me take care of this, girl," said Childress, deeply aroused. "The skinning happened not long ago; the buck who did it can't have gone far. If you'll ride home and keep out of danger, I'll do my best to run down the Indian and bring him back alive. Then you can punish him under the cruelty to animals law."

The auburn-haired nymph of capricious impulse straightened in her stirrups, and the dimple which was so enticing disappeared as completely as though it never had been. "Has anyone asked you to fight Circle G's battles?" she demanded indignantly.

"No—not exactly," he admitted, secretly admiring her spirit and perhaps openly looking some of his admiration. "But this is more than a Circle G affair. It's my duty as—as——" almost had he made a fatal slip that would have disclosed his

service to the King—"as a human being to bring this red dog to punishment. I'll drag him in if it's within my power."

"Two draggers are better than one," she persisted. "You needn't be squeaky about me; I can shoot some and I'm not afraid of any Indian that ever lived. Shall we ride together or spread out?"

Childress had been studying the topography as best he might from the saddle. They were perhaps five miles from the border and the beginning of the timber belt. Directly between lay one of those rocky buttes that crop up willy-nilly in the prairie provinces, as if the Rockies had tried to start farther east and then thought better of it. Already he had decided that they would spread out. His delay was only in an effort to determine which "spread" would be the safer one for her. The crack of a rifle startled him, coming as it did almost from under his ear. He turned to look.

Flame had unlimbered her Winchester and used it with effect. One of the buzzards had executed his last graceful, if heavy spiral, and was in a nose dive to death.

"One meal that bird won't get," muttered the ranch girl through set lips.

"A pretty shot, Flame—Miss Circle G!" he exclaimed.

He saw just a trace of the dimple as she began a smile at the quick correction of his slip.

"Shall we ride together or spread?" she demanded again.

Childress had decided. "If you'll take the west side of the butte," he suggested, "I'll ride the east side. The distance there is greater, but Silver undoubtedly is swifter than your cayuse."

"I'm not so sure; if there was time I'd find out," she began, then laughed. This was no time, she seemed to realize, to show that seldom-give-in spirit that was hers. "We'll settle about our horse-flesh some other time. Just now, it's get that Sioux buck, and if you plant him in a bog and skin him *alive*—well, almost, that would serve him right. I don't mind the loss of the steer, or the hide, but the torture of the poor dumb thing. There's no telling just what you may be, Mister Jack, but I'm sure you never tortured, did you?"

They were getting on. He felt it and wondered that he was not alarmed. But this was neither time nor place. One promise he managed to exact from her. If she rode to the timber belt, which was the States side of the line, and found no suspect, she was to turn back and make for home without waiting for him or looking for him. In his turn, Childress promised that if he "made" the guilty buck, he'd

bring him direct to the Gallagher ranch-house. With this exchange they were off, equally grim in spirit if not in looks and quite equally determined to avenge the suffering of the bogged-down steer.

It was after six when Flame Gallagher rode into the home ranch, flopped from the saddle and handed her tired cayuse to the mercies of one of their punchers. She asked no questions, for that was not according to "Hoyle," but she was unusually silent through dinner, which all of the outfit at the home-ranch ate together in the cook shack. So pronounced and so unusual was this rôle for the "light of the ranch," that her father took notice.

"What's the matter, Firecracker?" the ranchman asked as they sat on the porch after the meal. "Still worrying because that white-horse rider beat you out on buying the basin from the railroad?"

The one parent left to Flame Gallagher—in fact, the only one she really remembered, her mother having died when she was scarcely more than a babe—had contributed little to her charm of appearance, although much, probably, to the steel of her nerve and character. He was aquiline in appearance and, like the eagle, fearless. Nearly bald, he insisted on cutting the fringe of hair which was left to him with one of those patent contraptions which he had bought from a Winnipeg department store.

130 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

The result was not always an artistic success, but the use of the instrument appealed to Gallagher's sense of independence. He was tall, lean and dark—as dark as his daughter was light. A hard man to work for, was the report among the punchers of the province, but one who'd never ask a "hand" to do what he dared not do himself. "Firecracker" was his nickname for the daughter who had been the love of his life since her mother's death.

Flame Gallagher was worrying about the man who had nosed her out of the basin purchase, but not because she had lost that property. No matter what he had encountered on the other side of the butte, he should have been in long since to report. Her eyes, in the twilight, held straight to the eastward, the direction from which he should come. She even ceased to worry about the reception he would receive from the eagle-father and the outfit once he came. But she wondered why he did not come. The parent's questions, however, always demanded answer.

"I've forgotten that muff," she said with a drawl that was, perhaps, her most effective subterfuge. "I did my best on that run up to town and we Gallaghers don't pout over busted flushes. You could have given me a bit more time—would have, if you'd known."

"Then what—the silence?"

"Guess I'm tired, dad," she said. "Had a hard time with a bogged-down cow to-day. Got her out, but she'll lose her calf."

"Hell's tinklers, Fireworks," the parent responded heartily, "don't let a cow and a possible calf silence the joy of your Circle G. I'll stake you to another if this bogged bossy don't get back on her feet. You're taking raising of cattle too seriously for one who shouldn't have anything on her mind but a young horse band of her own. Cheer up!"

"A horse band, yes!" she exclaimed. "And have everybody in the province say you'd staked me to it. This idea of raising cattle was my own, and because everybody knows you wouldn't be troubled with 'em. You might have given me a range that didn't have bogs and quicksand; horses know enough to keep out of trouble. I'm tired out—think I'll turn in."

And turn in she did, but with her window open and her ears wide in the hope—for fear that a probable rogue of the range on a great silver horse would ride into the enemy's camp and might need her protection. To herself, she admitted that she did not savey this attractive gent of the saddle who called himself Jack Childress.

CHAPTER XI.

DID HE DARE?

CHILDRESS had chosen to search the east side of the butte because he thought that the avenue of escape most likely to be followed by the heartless skinner, whether he be an Indian, as Flame seemed confident, or one of the white renegades who infested the timber region south of the international line. He wasted no time seeking a hoof-print trail, but kept Silver at speed, using his eyes for an intensive search ahead and to either side. There was no reward while he skimmed the prairie, but he pushed on regardless of the fact that he must have crossed the boundary. So incensed was he over the outrage and so intent on bringing the perpetrator back to the Gallegher girl that he was willing for once to write his own extradition ticket.

Almost had he given up hope when, through a rift in the scraggly forest, he saw a mounted figure ahead of him. Silver always had speed in reserve and now was called upon to expend it. They were gaining rapidly when chance or caution caused the quarry to turn in his saddle. Proof of guilt came

whistling back in a rifle bullet so hastily fired that it did no harm. At the distance, the sergeant could not tell whether his assailant was red or white, but that no longer mattered. The silver horse was urged to greater speed and at no small risk, for the going had become rocky and was anything but a race track.

Noisily his horse rounded a bend in the trail and just in time to show the man ahead spring from his saddle and disappear into the thick cover of trail-side brush. Marking with his eye the spot of digression, Childress pushed on to it and pulled his own mount.

The growth he found there—a patch of vicious-looking devil's-clubs—would have convinced him that something was wrong even if no warning shot had been fired. No sane man, unless pressed for concealment, would submit himself to such a crown and robe of thorns. A branch slashed from the outermost stalk told the sergeant two more things: He had not mistaken the point of disappearance, and his quarry, so anxious to avoid inspection, was equipped either with an ax or a skinning knife, probably the latter, in view of that horror back on the ranch.

He glanced at the abandoned cayuse, a scrawny, flea-bitten gray, who stood a few yards down the

trail, cropping contentedly at some brush that evidently was not thorned. Its saddle was a cheap one and its cante carried no pack. The skinner must have found some way of disposing of the hide farther back on the trail after the pursuit was under way.

Several dangers presented themselves in connection with the situation. A shot from ambush was the likeliest one, but that was dismissed with a shrug. The possibility of his passing the other in some brushy hiding place and of the man's backtracking to his mount was another. But Childress decided to take the chance. Dismounting, he fastened the reins to the pommel of the saddle. The well trained Silver would wait, he knew, a reasonable time for his master's return and if, for any cause, the master did not come back would return to the Open A. It was no country for the beast to be hampered with the dropped rein of an ordinary alighting. Slipping his "blazer"—a short-handled, sharp-bitted instrument—from its loop on his riding leather, he plunged into the jungle-like patch.

The fact that an energetic wood-chopper had just passed made the sergeant's progress somewhat easier, but did not render him immune from the inflictions of the small thorns, barbed and poi-

sonous. The spreading leaves of the woody stem had a way of concealing all sorts of viciousness, then forcing it upon him in many a wound. He was ready to agree with the popular verdict that the jagers were "the very devil" when they got into one's skin. But he did not compliment them by the thought that they could stop him, and at last hacked his way through, but only into another difficulty.

The thorny cover behind, a precipitous, thickly brushed ascent of the ridge began. Higher than his head was the undergrowth, despite the rock-strewn surface. No longer had a trail been left by the quarry, but that Childress was not going amiss in attempting the ridge was proved to him by certain sounds which drifted back—the smashing of rotten logs as they broke under the fleeing man's weight, the rattle of rocks dislodged by his feet, and once the sound of a fall, as of a heavy body tripped and thrown.

So evident were the causes of these noises that the sergeant knew he had gained ground in the first lap of the chase. Probably his quarry had halted after cutting into the devil's-clubs in the hope that, not having seen his actual dismounting, the other would ride past. Childress' noisy entrance must have started him on further flight.

Soon there came encouragement in another glimpse of the pursued—just a hunched up back in a checker-board shirt under one of the black felt hats so generally worn in the region. No sight of features was possible, no estimate as to height or the color of hair beneath the slouched headgear. Although Childress had been fired upon and was thus absolved from that never-fire-first rule of the Mounted, he did not care to chance a shot on suspicion.

The encouragement of this glimpse was soon spoiled by the discovery that he, as pursuer, was in a crisscrossed windfall, while the pursued had gained a deer run which quartered to the crest of the ridge. As the unknown, now called an enemy, disappeared over the comparatively easy course he had won, rage possessed Childress—the lust to overtake and overcome at any cost to himself.

For several minutes he disregarded the saner advices of his woodcraft, and “fought brush,” slipping, sliding, butting into it, crawling on all fours. A fall that shook him to the marrow reduced him to calmer methods. With comparative deliberation, he began picking his way out of the seemingly impregnable, wind-made fortification. In time he, too, gained the deer run.

No one was in sight when he reached the crest

and paused for a moment to recover breath lost on the laborious ascent. But the hobnailed boots of the fugitive had left their trace in the loose shale. Evidently the man ahead had decided that the ridge, after all, was an unsatisfactory refuge and at once had undertaken the down path on the south side, where a series of ledges gave upon a thickly timbered area of normal level.

This particular region was strange to Childress, and he did not like the looks of this descent, but decided that where another had gone he could follow. A jump landed him on the first ledge below, almost in his quarry's boot tracks, and he raced across to a second brink. Upon a ledge still further down, he could see that this jump also had been negotiated with safety, and he went over with like success.

The extent of the drop to the third ledge might have halted him had he been permitted any choice in the matter, but, as he stood estimating the distance, decision was taken out of his hands. The shelf edge crumbled beneath his feet. Before he could realize what had happened, he was painfully trying to arise from another flat some thirty feet below.

Throwing off the shock of the impact, satisfying himself that no bones were broken, he gained his

138 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

feet and stared about. The tops of Douglas firs, growing straight from the normal forest level, were on a line with the rock shelf upon which he stood, indicating that a really formidable precipice had been reached, one of a height too problematical for the most foolhardy jumper. Hope that the man in the checkerboard flannel must be somewhere on the ledge started Childress' search without delay.

But again disappointment was his portion. Although there could be no doubt that the fugitive had landed there, as attested by the disturbed shale, no sign of him could be found upon the ledge—one of less extent than the others and, with the exception of a lone hemlock, absolutely devoid of cover. In some way the other must have made this last leap.

Guarding against a second precipitation without consent, Childress flattened himself upon the rock and crawled to the edge. Peering over, his eyes soon solved the mystery of the disappearance.

Upon the rocks full fifty feet below lay a ladder improvised by the nailing of slats upon a slender cut-tree. By means of this the unknown doubtless had descended with ease and safety; then shut off further pursuit by throwing down the cliff's scaling device.

Although the sergeant could see no one below,

his deductions were corroborated by a burst of laughter—raucous in its defiance, almost demoniacal—which cut the air upward from the forest cover. Having met defeat before, Childress had thought himself schooled to it, but this taunt was a heavy drain upon his sincerity. There seemed, however, no counter irritant. The height was too great for another jump; the sheer wall offered no hold for fingers and toes by which he might lower himself. Having done his best, he would have to give up the chase, ascend the series of ledges, and get back to his horse by way of the deer run. Just possibly he could discover where the culprit—of whose guilt he no longer had any doubt—had thrown the down-to-mud-line hide and have that much to carry back to Flame Gallegher.

This decided he drew back from the brink, regained his feet, and looked about for the easiest start. It was several minutes before he realized that he was caught in a trap. Although shrubs to furnish climbing holds had grown on the ledges higher up, this one, which he first must scale, was as bald as an eagle. Not until he had searched the flinty surface at close range for crevices and projections and tried out to futility the cutting of steps with his ax, did he appreciate his recent temerity.

The more he studied the situation, the more

serious it looked. He would not be missed at the Gallagher Ranch. Even if Flame cared to mention their chance meeting and his aid with the bogged-down cow, she doubtless would consider his failure to return as proof that the general suspicion against him was well founded. Silver, he believed, would be able to find his way back to the Open A, but might be hours doing it. The arrival of the horse, riderless, would alarm Mahaffy, but how would the constable know where to look for his missing chief?

Scarcely could he reassure himself by thinking that the human fox, in the timber below, would do anything in the way of directing a rescue party. Doubtless, he soon would be on his way to recover his cayuse and the discarded loot. Even Silver might be in danger, although the sergeant had hope that the sagacious animal would effectively resist being taken in by a stranger.

Childress measured with his eyes the distance to the nearest treetop, calculating the chance of a leap into its branches and the uncertainty of being able to hold on. This he decided was too dubious for attempt, except as a last resort, driven by hunger and thirst. The lone hemlock next became the object of his conjecture, but proved too short by several feet to give access to the ledge above. He expended three shots from his revolver in

broadcasting for help, but not so much in hope of answer as that he should leave nothing undone.

There came response, however, from some forest cover. A bullet clipped past his ear and flattened against the rock wall behind him. A second shot went just over his head. His triumphant enemy evidently was willing to shoot him off the shelf. Before stepping back out of range, he emptied his gun hit-miss into the brush below. He was tempted to risk the running jump toward the nearest treetop, but in time he checked himself, not yet ready to risk the hundredth chance. There must be some safer way down. His eyes lifted to the cerulean panoply overhead, then eased down to the line of the granite floor and swept the feathery tops of green. They sought inspiration and they found it. With sure strokes of his ax he attacked the lone hemlock.

The trapped sergeant's "big idea" was one which required the preliminary of labor. His eyes were trained to accuracy and he trusted their measurement of the space between the top of the sturdy Scotch conifer and the trunk of the rock-rooted young hemlock. Attacking with his short-handled ax, he soon had the chips flying, with a pause now and then to calculate the exact direction of the tree's drop. His chief anxiety was not

142 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

over his ability as an axman, but as to whether the umbrellalike branches of the fir would afford lodgment sufficiently strong to support the combined weight of the hemlock and himself.

With the small crackle of a bunch of penny fire-crackers, the tree soon broke away from its stump. His ax-aim proved true. But to the sergeant the seconds seemed minutes during that period in which it was decided whether the falling tree would remain in the embrace of its half-sister of the pine family or would veer to one side for a plunge to the rocks below, there to mock him. A gasp of relief escaped his lips when, quivering throughout its length, it settled definitely into the very crotch for which he had aimed.

No time did he waste testing its strength and security. Either it would hold or it would not—either he would escape the trap into which the bog skinner had led him or meet his end in a plunge without cost or ceremony. As always before in his grown-up life, when the issue demanded he dared.

CHAPTER XII.

BY SINGLE STRAND.

AFTER anchoring the severed trunk of the hemlock upon the shelf with such bowlders as he could move, to prevent, if possible, its turning, Sergeant Childress sat down on the brink, his legs dangling. He gripped the hemlock tightly, then lowered his body overside. That end of the tree, at least, supported his weight. With six-inch reaches, he began to move out from the ledge.

He dared not hurry; nor could he ease his progress by wriggling—the hold upon the fir of the hemlock was too uncertain. His body hung as a dead weight, the strain upon his arms, hands, and fingers increasing with every slow move.

One stout, out-flung branch, depending from the lower trunkside, soon impeded his progress; indeed, threatened the success of his venture. Fear of dislodging the frailer end of his support prohibited his trying to swing his body around it.

In an almost insupportable pause he decided on a way. With Jack Childress, thus far, there always had been a way.

Linking his left elbow around the diminishing hemlock to relieve his tortured fingers and the more surely support his weight, he slipped the blazer from his belt and performed an amputation upon the limb. Having difficulty in returning the ax to its sheath, he dropped it. The clank of its fall upon the rocks sent a shiver through his racked frame.

Reminded thus of the alternative fate, he returned to his hand-over-hand performance, receiving in the effort an unexpected scalp wound from the stump of the branch he had removed.

The remaining yards entailed mental and physical torture, for his bridge began to bend. But at last he felt the needles of the fir brush his face; soon his body pressed gratefully in among the branches. One last reach, and he gained hold upon the main trunk. The ordeal was ended.

As down a shaky flight of stairs, he descended the older tree and with caution other than for his footing. Although it was highly probable that the skinner was by now far away and going farther, the fact was not established. Having overcome so many teeth of the trap, he did not wish to be caught by a last one. Seeing and hearing nothing, however, he took the short jump to the ground from the lowest branch.

For several minutes he lay upon a bed of fir

needles at the foot of the tree which had formed his stairway, listening for sound of his quarry. Scarcely did he expect to hear any such, but he was taking no chances. Judging from the fact that no shots had been fired at him while he was overhanging the hemlock, during every moment of which ordeal he had presented a fair target, it was reasonable to assume that the unknown, red or white, was on his way.

A stranger to the region, Childress was at loss which way to turn for the easiest crossing of the ridge. They had crossed from north to south, so his choice must lay to east or west. As a matter of fact, he had no choice, at least nothing tangible on which to base one. He tossed a coin, heads west, tails east, and followed its dictation away from the sun that was sinking discouragingly low in the west.

As he traveled along the base of the ridge, thrown up by some prehistoric convulsion of nature and remindful of a scar, his tread was soft as any Indian's. His eyes were ever watchful for sign of the enemy, but his mind was elsewhere.

His thoughts were most of all upon the Gallegher girl of colorful wonder. What a spirited nymph of the ranch she was! Probably she had found no one either suspicious or alarming on the course he

had sent her, and by now she was riding homeward. He was glad that she had not come with him, for she probably would have insisted on entering the brush and climbing the ridge. What could he have done with her had she followed him down to that trap of a ledge? How could he have brought her to safety on the forest floor? Supple as she was and undoubtedly strong from her life in the open, it was incredible that she could have overhanded on the hemlock bridge. And had he crossed to safety, leaving her on the ledge? While one man could throw down the improvised tree-trunk ladder, only a Sampson, singly, could have replaced it.

Presently he began to wonder at himself that he thought so much about her. That he had kept her out of trouble, as was his duty both as a man and a "Mountie" should have been sufficient. What was the use of speculating on the might-have-beens? Was it possible that—— He laughed at himself. Of course it wasn't possible that a hard-boiled sergeant of the Royal had developed a sentimental interest in a ranch or any other sort of girl.

Then he came to a gap in the ridge and upon a clearly blazed trail to the other side. He speeded his pace, one that was tireless from long mushing practice behind the dog teams of the Frozen North. An hour before the sun went out he was back at

the starting point, where he found Silver and the skinner's cayuse on terms of grazing amity. Evidently his quarry had not cared to return even for his horse, perhaps fearing that his pursuer had a rear guard.

Mounting the silver beast, but leaving the flea-bitten cayuse with reins dropped, in the hope of inviting its rider's return, Childress rode slowly over the immediate back trail. His search trail-side for the torture-taken hide was eventually rewarded. He found it in a gunny sack where the pursued had tossed it into a clump of alders. He rode back toward the outlaw's deserted mount.

Night was falling rapidly and what to do became something of a problem. Even if the cayuse would lead at the end of a rope, the strange back trail would prove a problem. It would be midnight before he could hope to reach the Lazy G home ranch, even could he find it in the dark. An arrival at such time must cause a commotion that would not further his purpose of getting an exact grasp of the Fire Weed rustling situation. Moreover, and quite important, there was still the chance that the skinner would regain his nerve and return for the abandoned cayuse.

Changing the hiding place of the sacked hide, he led Silver back to within gun range of the grazing

clump that the ugly cayuse seemed to fancy. There he found a cover for both his beast and himself, determined on a night's vigil and a daylight ride to the Gallagher ranch in case nothing developed.

There were a couple of emergency rations in his saddle bag, and he made quite a meal under the circumstances of a camp fire's inadvisability. There was a bare fragment of moon that night, not enough to see with any accuracy. But he knew the keenness of Silver's ears, and that he could depend upon them. If any human approached, the horse would give warning, by snort or by tug upon the rope by which he attached the horse to himself.

"Nothing like a real horse for an alarm clock," he murmured sleepily. "Hope that Flame had sense enough to ride home whatsoever!"

He was more tired than he had realized before throwing himself down upon his improvised couch of brush. Every muscle of his body from gun-belt up ached from the strain of that hemlock crossing. After covering himself with the slicker, carried rolled on the cantle of his saddle, he soon slept.

Next morning, after a night of no alarms, he remembered that he had dreamed. Most unusual for him to remember dreams! These that now came to mind were mixed—of a flame girl and a siren

widow. He was not exactly clear about them. He could not be sure just where they had taken him and he possessed no dream-book for their interpretation. But the fact that he had dreamed at all was troubling. He must needs watch his step.

Childress decided that the skinner did not mean to return, either for his cayuse or his cruel booty. He would take both to Galleghers and let the old ranchman do with them as he thought best. They should serve as something of an introduction for his uninvited visit.

Without difficulty he caught the small horse which seemed willing enough to come along. Packing with him the sack-covered hide was a different matter. The blood scent, so distasteful to animals, had grown stronger over night. But finally he succeeded in calming the beasts, and they were off for his destination of yesterday.

Once packed the cayuse led easily enough and good progress was made after they got beyond the "rough." They had passed the scene of yesterday's bovine tragedy, when he saw three horsemen ride out of a draw some distance ahead and quarter in his direction. Without increasing his speed, he held his course, knowing that unless the trio changed their direction they would meet within half a mile. Considering the compass point from which they

appeared, it was reasonable to suppose that they were Lazy G riders. While they likely would be curious and ask questions, they scarcely would make trouble for a stranger headed toward their home ranch in the full light of a brilliant prairie morning.

As he neared the point of convergence it did not surprise him to hear a loud whoop from the ranchmen. Nor was he alarmed when they separated, urging their horses into a run, and drove up on either side of him, their ropes swirling in long loops, which hung just clear of the ground. This was not an unusual performance when a group of punchers met a stranger riding alone over their own range. Nine times out of ten the demonstration meant nothing but the outlet of excess spirit. He laughed to himself when he thought of the chance they had of frightening him.

Yet the next moment two of the loops spread and hissed out in twin circles, curving above the punchers' heads. One fell with the swoop of a hawk down over Childress' shoulders. The other whipped over Silver's head, and settled around the beast's arched neck. In a flash both ropes came taut with a jerk that almost pulled the sergeant from his saddle, and nearly overbalanced his horse.

For the first time in years Jack Childress was genuinely surprised; he was also indignant, but as

yet not alarmed. These horse wranglers had gone further than was usual in the rough play of the range, but he had no idea that they would follow up their advantage. At the moment he did not think of the warning that Flame had carried to his little ranch in the cup of Open A—that the Gallagher gang were going to get him. He expected that any moment the pressure which held the ropes taut would cease, and that they would ride up, grinning at his discomfiture, and insolently demand his tribute to their roping accuracy.

He strained his powerful arms against the clutch which bound them to his sides, but the jerk had come just at the right moment to pinion him securely. He could get no leverage against the rope, and was helpless.

Silver, excited by the undreamed of indignity of being roped when he already carried a rider, began to plunge, but quieted down at a word from the man in the saddle.

Childress called out angrily to the punchers, getting a derisive laugh for his trouble. Once more he realized the potency of the uniform of the Royal and the handicap of operating in mufti. This outrage never would have been thought of had he worn the scarlet. He tried to reach his revolver, but his fingers would not carry to its butt, and his arm

152 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

was powerless to lend any assistance. By a single strand he was held. Bitterly he condemned in his mind the confidence which had led him into this sisal trap.

Then began a performance which at first he did not understand. The wrangler whose rope was around his body began to ride a wide circle, while the one who had caught the stallion held hard. In no time there was a second circle of rope around his body.

It came to him that they meant to make him prisoner by winding him up in the rope. To checkmate this he endeavored to make his horse wheel with the circle of the puncher, but the second rope interfered and he only succeeded in delaying the winding operation. Meantime the third puncher was busying himself capturing the led cayuse which had broken away in the excitement.

In spite of his extremity, he was forced to admire the skill of his captors. More artistic handling of sixty-foot ropes he had never seen. Not for an instant was the original grip around his arms and body loosened, and rapidly the circlets increased in number until he would be bound up like a mummy. Finally he gave up the struggle against the strands, and ceased his effort to throw off the successive loops.

"Got yuh nice and clean and gentle this time, hawse thief," was the greeting of the puncher who handled the body rope, as he made the final circle.

"You seem to have me this time," returned the sergeant, swallowing his rage.

"Yea-bo," chortled the second puncher, who had dismounted to permit the circling and who still held the silver horse. "It'll be the last time on this here range."

"Nice little weapon this," remarked the mounted puncher, whipping Childress' revolver from its holster. He broke the weapon, emptying the cartridges onto the prairie floor. Then he returned the "empty" to its holster, and busied himself tying the helpless non-com to pommel and stirrups.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" Childress demanded.

"This ain't no outrage; it's a party, ain't it, Roper?" advised the dismounted wrangler. "Didn't yuh get yuhr invite? Anyway yuh come along pretty enough an' just at the right time to save us going over into the cup after yuh."

The two settled back into their saddles to await the return of their companion, who was having trouble, not only with the outlaw's cayuse, but also with his own mount, which Childress recognized as one of the famous Black Hawks, a breed in which

154 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Sam Gallagher specialized. The two men who stood guard over him were typical punchers, one a ruddy-cheeked youth, the other a grizzled veteran wearing a drooping mustache which he worried when his fingers were not otherwise engaged. They were not so well mounted as the third of the party, which led the captive to believe that this third was either range boss or foreman. He awaited the leader's return with patience, and he held no further converse with the frolicsome pair.

Even to a natural-born optimist, one who had come through a needle's-eye of danger many a time because of undaunted hopefulness, the situation was far from cheerful. He did not fear for his life. Lynching, even of suspected horse thieves, long since ceased to be an outdoor sport of the Canadian ranges. About the worst that would happen to him was the indignity of being dragged into the Gallagher home ranch "all wound 'round" with a puncher's string. But that would be a little bit of too much, he thought, when he considered Flame Gallagher on hand to view his humiliation. Just why he cared so much, when, whatever befell, would be in the line of duty, he hated to admit. But he did care, and the Flame of Fire Weed, whose smile started with a reappearing dimple, was the reason. Again he cautioned himself to "watch his step."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN PUNISHMENT GULCH.

"SMILING DICK" Murdock, range boss on the Gallagher ranch, was not looking up to his sobriquet when he rode back to the group with a reluctant cayuse in tow. Childress noted a handsome man of about his own age and weight, although probably a trifle shorter when out of the saddle. He was dark, almost to a point of swarthinness, but his frown was not unbecoming.

"Lucky morning for us, boys," he said to his punchers. "We've got the White Horse King and got him with the goods two ways from the ace."

"Two ways?" asked the florid horseman, called Rust by his stirrup brother.

Murdock nodded. "The cayuse is one of that bunch they ran off last fall. They've tried brand-blotting, but you can still trace the mark of the Lazy G. And the other count is a hide stripped from one of Miss Flame's steers. The brute's not beyond a bog-skinning job, judging by the size and shape of the evidence."

"What we going to do with him?" asked Roper.

156 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"There's rope and to spare for a nice little four-in-hand necktie."

The foreman swung in his saddle for a searching inspection of the prairie. Because of the rolling nature of the region the visibility was not great, but as far as the eye could cover they were alone. He turned to the captive.

"You've got a powerful nerve, hombre, riding this range in daylight, leading a stolen hawse, packed with a butchered hide. Don't you think we're ever on the job, looking after our own? What you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing until this rope trick is unwound and you take me before your owner. I'll talk to him, one ranchman to another. I was headed for the Lazy G home ranch when you stopped me."

The sergeant's calm speech seemed greatly to amuse Roper and Rust. Smiling Dick's facial muscles were too engaged in a sneer even to trace a smile.

"Having pulled wool on the daughter, you think you can do the same on the old man," he said with heat. "If ever you see Sam Gallegher, which I doubt, you'll find him a different proposition."

So they knew at the home ranch that Flame had seen and talked with him. That much was easily deduced from Murdock's outburst, which

seemed tintured with jealousy. But which of their meetings had she discussed—the one in the railroad land office at Strathconna or that memorable occasion when she had visited so briefly the Open A? That she had said nothing of their experience on the range the previous day seemed likely, else the foreman would not have made so much of the hide which the led horse was carrying.

"I'll take my chances with any honest man," returned Childress shortly.

"You're going to take chances with three and that in short order," snapped Murdock, and he turned to his companions, "Let's get down into Friday Gulch, where there's small chance of our being disturbed. Flame will be riding somewhere and we don't want her to be stumbling into the party. We'll give him a regular trial—settle the whole thing without any fuss or feathers."

Rust nodded approvingly. "Yuh be judge, Dick; I'll be jury, and Roper the cheerful executioner. Lead on!"

Short as it was, the ride across and down into the gulch fringed with cottonwoods was not a pleasant one for the sergeant. He did not doubt that the foreman already had in mind a punishment—one probably that would be humiliating rather than life-taking, and one that would leave

the perpetrators comparatively safe from penalty. His keen mind went over every possibility of escape, and found none that would answer. He was hopelessly bound, his revolver was empty and his mount under rope. As a last resort he might declare himself and his mission, threatening them with the wrath of the Scarlet. But scarcely would they believe him under the circumstances, even if they found the black badge of the Mounted which he carried in a secret pocket. If they gave him the slightest chance, he would lay into them and inflict as much damage as he could. But if there was no opening, he felt sure he could endure the punishment without a whimper. In that belief lay his chief consolation. They never would have the fun of hearing him plead for mercy.

"Get him out of the saddle, boys, and put hobbles on him," ordered Murdock, when they had reached the bottom of the small canyon which nature had cut into the hillside at a sharp right angle. "We'll hold this court in style."

Childress felt that the time had arrived for protest and warning. Had he been making an arrest in his official capacity he would have been required to offer caution that whatever was said might be used against the prisoner. If these three persisted, he one day would be called upon to proceed against

them. His calmness was icy when he began; his entire manner should have served as a warning.

"You're making a sorry mistake, men. I'm as honest as any of you. Never stole a horse nor lifted a hide in my life. I own a small ranch in this region, as I guess you've heard. I'm raising and breaking some horses on my own. Yesterday I decided to ride over and make the acquaintance of the Lazy G outfit. I came upon a bogged-down steer that just had been skinned alive. I fired a mercy shot and took up the trail. Lost my man in the rough of a ridge the other side of the line. Got his horse and the hide, though, and was bringing them in when came this uncalled for attack by ropes. All I ask is that you take me to your home ranch and let Gallegher decide. Otherwise——"

"Can the talk," cut in Murdock. "The old man's too damned merciful in his old age. He won't have any stock left unless we curb this rustling. You're going to have some he-men decide your case and I'll bet when the verdict's in you'll keep to the States where you belong."

Childress had made no mention of the fact that Flame Gallegher had been with him when he put the bogged steer out of its misery or that she had undertaken one angle of the pursuit where the trail had seemed to fork. It was evident that she had

said nothing at home about meeting him, a silence for which she doubtless had excellent reasons of her own. He would respect that silence, come what might.

The three Lazy G riders drew off a bit for consultation, leaving him, thoroughly trussed, seated on a fallen log. They were not beyond earshot, although their conversation did not seem to be intended for him.

At first, the two punchers were for employing old-time methods: a lynching and be done with it, "the way they manage hawse thieves over in Montana where he's from," as Roper put it.

But this the foreman vetoed as too drastic, too likely to bring unnecessary trouble upon themselves and to the ranch in case they were found out.

"Suppose we give him twenty or thirty lashes, carry him to the border and set him on foot?" This brilliant idea came from Rust who seemed to have a Nero-like enjoyment of the prospective situation. "The cayuse belongs to us and we can empound the stallion for trespassing. With all his nerve, boggin' in broad-day, the big gent won't come back this way if yuh let me play the quirt."

Evidently Murdock had more sense of responsibility than the two punchers. This had begun

to work, blunting somewhat the jealousy aroused in his breast by the interest expressed in the stranger by his employer's daughter. He felt that they had caught the rider of the silver horse red-handed; yet the captive's calmness was disturbing. Besides there was no telling how Flame, long the object of his adoration, might look upon the affair. Suppose he took Childress to the home ranch and the plausible scoundrel lied himself out of their ropes. The situation would be worse than before. If only they had a confession made before the three of them and so convincing that Gallagher would turn him over to the authorities despite pleas from any source whatsoever!

"You two hobble the talk for a minute," he said to Roper and Rusty. "I've had an idea."

"Heavenly horizon, Dick!" cried Roper. "Don't let her bite yuh."

"Iders are hell on adnoids, my old ma always said," added Rusty.

Evidently the pair feared that the "party" was slipping. Whatever happened the responsibility scarcely would be theirs and both were of the sort who count the frolic before the cost. They knew loyalty, these riders of the Fire Weed, better than did many city employees; but from the very nature of their work ahorse, with its constant dangers, its

exposure to all sorts of weather, its broken bones and near-death hemorrhages in the "busting" end of their game, they were somewhat hardened and keen for any diverting excitement.

Smiling Dick Murdock strolled across to Childress, whose clean-shaved lips—service habit—set tightly, rather than curled over the three-to-one odds.

"One or two small raids we might have stood for, Silver," the foreman began. "But when you come into our own range and start to build a ranch house, as if you hoped or intended to live in our midst, it's too much. A rustler's shack in the Fire Weed! That's something that can't be stood. And already you're presuming on a few acres bought from the railroad company, a fragment we all overlooked until it was too late!

"We've talked it all over, and the verdict is plum' against you. Punishment has got to be inflicted for violating the law of the range. But we're humane gents, we are, and willing to be some merciful. If you care to sign a confession that you are a rustler and a skinner of bogged cows and let the three of us witness it, we'll let you off some. What about it, rustler?"

For a moment Childress seemed to be considering the proposition. A confession of the sort de-

manded would probably save him much humiliation, but it would end his activities in the region and leave the mystery of the Fire Weed robbers unsolved. Any document he might sign under the circumstances would bring no penalty to him. The commissioner at Ottawa would see to that. But never had he yielded in the face of danger, and he was not ready to do so now.

"I'll sign nothing under duress!" he answered decisively.

"You'll think duress a hell of a more serious proposition before we're through," said Murdock quietly, and returned to his men.

"Yore ider didn't seem to be no good," said Rust, as the troubled foreman neared the punchers.

Roper was grinning. "But I gave birth to one of my own while yuh was gone. Why not brand the son of a butcher as if he was a maverick? A horse-shoe on the forehead with the Lazy G inside! I've got a running iron."

"Whoah, boy! There is an ider," congratulated Rust. "Once he gets that burned into his classic brow he'll keep out of the province or I don't know who's what."

Childress heard every word. He hated to think what some artist in live-stock pyrotechnics might do to him in his present defenceless condition. It

was evident that foreman Murdock controlled the situation; he watched the handsome stockman closely.

For a time—several minutes, although they seemed longer—Murdock considered. Then: "Build a fire, boys. That's the best idea yet. I'll take the responsibility."

The preliminaries were brief. Roper went to his horse and from somewhere about the saddle produced an iron resembling a poker. It was a tool of the range long outlawed in the United States because of the service it performed for brand-blotting rustlers of both horse and cattle stock. On most ranches the punchers whose duty it is to brand the strays which have escaped the round-up carry an iron that plants the entire brand at one pressure, embosses it, as it were, in the hair with the least possible pain and disfigurement to the animal.

Rust seemed to take diabolical glee in building a small fire of the driest twigs he could find. So expert was he at this that Childress' suspicion was aroused. Doubtless both Rust and Roper had been brand-blotters in their time. But small service did suspicion do him in the present emergency.

Horrible to think of was the punishment which Murdock, as foreman and obvious chief of the

trio, seemed to have accepted. That they would not burn him deep enough to endanger his life he felt certain. There was some doubt in their suspicions or they would have shot him down at sight. But to go through life with a horseshoe scar on his forehead, even though later he brought prison punishment to all concerned in the operation, seemed insupportable. The certain pain of the branding did not trouble him so much. In the service he had suffered as much as a man can suffer and live to remember in his nightmares. The resultant trace of a bullet wound would not have been so bad; he had several tucked around his exceedingly vital body and at least one leaden slug bedded down where surgeons of the Royal did not care to probe for it. But a brand! He remembered the Scarlet letter of the old Puritans and the crime brands which certain nations of Europe put upon particular criminals. The situation was insupportable; yet he would not weaken—he'd be damned if he would.

Preparations went on apace, with him watching every move. As if nothing more important than the frying of morning bacon had been on the bill, he heard Roper give Rust a "call" for not building a hot enough fire and making so much smoke about it that some of the Silver Horse gang might get

166 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

wise and take a pot shot at them. Rust flared at the aspersion and told Roper to go "plum" to where it was "hotter," on the theory that he was going there anyway.

While they were quarreling, the sergeant called to Murdock. The eagerness with which the foreman responded possibly indicated that the foreman was losing his nerve and his desire for the particular punishment which the box canyon was to cloak. An average man would have taken a tip from this alacrity, made the confession under demand and denied it when again able to fight his own battles. But Sergt. Jack Childress was not an average man. Never had he compromised, and he was not ready to do so now. They could burn him if they dared, but they could not make him weaken and they could not force him to give up his quest in the Fire Weed.

"Mind lighting my pipe for me while they're heating the iron?" he asked, as casually as he might have asked for a match in the Strathconna Club. "The pipe's in my breast pocket and it don't need to be filled."

Dick Murdock took a startled backward step. The nerve of the man! And he was not thinking of nerve in the derisive sense. He had that same sort of nerve, to a degree; but he doubted if it

would have carried him through such an impossible situation as that in which the horse thief—and he honestly believed the rider of the silver beast to be one—now found himself.

“Don’t you ever weaken?” he asked.

“Why weaken, when there’s nothing to be weak about?”

“We’re going to brand you.”

“That don’t kill, and even if it did, death’s only an experiment into something no one knows anything about.”

“You’re not afraid?”

Childress laughed at him heartily. “Of death or of pain; neither. I’ve near suffered both; never died and always came back to pay up those who had caused the pain.”

“Good Lord, I’d hate to play poker with you.” This sort of sprung from Murdock’s lips without his intent.

“Maybe you will—some day, Murdock; but it won’t be when you deal all the cards and look into my hand while my shuffling fingers are crippled. Anyway, light my pipe, if you don’t mind.”

Murdock got the pipe from the breast pocket of the sergeant’s trail coat, a non-uniform one he had purchased in Ottawa against the time of casting the uniform behind him.

"Have some of my tobacco, even if you are a pest."

"No, thank you. By the time they get through with that branding iron I'll be cussin' you so hard that you'll wonder why you ever were born. The core of the pipe will be enough for me."

Murdock seemed troubled; took off his soft brimmed Stetson and combed his black hair with his fingers.

"I don't make you, stranger," he said slowly, as if his thoughts troubled him. "I've put up a hawse thief in my day—two of 'em. But they never——"

"They never were horse thieves the two you led the lynching party on, and you know it. Do you think you're ever going to get away from that? Do you think that I'm the only one who is coming up here after you? And the others won't come alone or be roped—*roped!*"

"Now, I'll sure have to get you!" Murdock was white about the lips and blue about the nose, as men get when suddenly confronted with a past they had thought forgotten.

"Now's your chance," said Childress.

"If you'd left Flame alone——" began the foreman.

"Here come the boys, tell them to put the brand as neatly as they can. Long as these ropes are

about me, I've as much chance as that bogged steer——"

"Don't call yourself names," inserted Murdock.

Then interruption came from the two cheerful punchers who had the iron red hot. There was a moment of fortune for Childress, because Rust and Roper were scrapping among themselves. The question was which one could do the best and most artistic job upon the forehead of the captive.

Before this matter of artistry was settled, the clatter of a speeding horse struck their startled ears. All turned to look down the gulch as a mounted figure came into view. There were muttered exclamations from the Lazy G trio when they recognized the rider as Flame Gallegher.

She pulled up her horse at the edge of the group, and for a moment gazed about her with an incredulous expression.

"What is the meaning of this, Dick Murdock?" she at last demanded, a note of authority in her voice.

"We're just having a little fun with this here hawse thief," mumbled Murdock lamely.

"A little fun?" she repeated scornfully. "That man is tied up as though he were a criminal and that running iron is all aglow. What were you going to do with it?"

"It's a branding party, Flame," said the handsome foreman. "Caught the white-hawse king with the goods at last."

She flared angrily. "Then it's over before it begins or three Lazy G's look for other jobs. Even if he was all you say, you'd have no right to take the law into your own hands. Rust, if you have any respect for your rope, untie Mr. Childress instantly! If you don't I'll cut it into so many calf-size lengths you'll never get it together again."

CHAPTER XIV.

HIS BIGGEST DEBT.

THERE was some grumbling on the part of the punchers, but their feeling for Bernice Gallegher, popularly known as Flame, was akin to worship. To them her word was law. Moreover, Rust had the old-time puncher's regard for his "string." The sheep look was surely on his face as he threw down the red-hot running iron and helped Roper unwind the prisoner.

Childress had said nothing throughout this providential interruption. At first the shock of the unexpected deliverance was too much for him. Then, feeling at a loss for suitable words before an audience, he let his eyes speak for him.

As the last coil was loosened he arose and spent a few vigorous moments exercising life back into his numbed arms. His powerful hands opened and shut as though itching to lay hold of one of his tormentors. The punchers edged away in apprehension; the foreman stood his ground, shifting weight from boot to boot like some school boy awaiting teacher's punishment.

The sergeant then took out his revolver, and with expert movements filled the cylinder with cartridges from his belt. They had caught him napping once. He was determined that it never should happen again and he would take no chances on any overruling of the woman's verdict.

He looked up to find Flame smiling at him, and again realized the fullness of her auburn-crowned beauty. And that first day in Strathconna he had pronounced her "none too pretty!" Oh, well, second sight was often best! To-day every freckle looked a beauty mark.

"You'll hardly need that—now," she smiled, with a gesture toward the gun.

So far not a word had been said about their meeting on the range the previous day, the salvage of the bogged cow and their forked lines of pursuit after the heartless skinner of the unfortunate steer. Childress was determined to say nothing, whatever Flame's interest in keeping the meeting a secret. If anything was said, she would have to do the talking.

The charge he had flung at Murdock was not sheer bluff, but based on something he had learned over in Montana when preparing for his entry into the province as a rancher. The expression of the Lazy G foreman had told him much that probably

would be of use later on. There had been a double lynching over in the Bitter Root and the guilt of at least one of the victims later had been found exceedingly doubtful. That crime, of course, was entirely beyond the jurisdiction of the Mounted, but the "mistake" probably accounted for the presence of Murdock on the Lazy G and would be something to look into when he threw off the rôle of ranchman and donned the uniform of the service that is feared even as it is respected.

"If you knew the evidence we had against this rustler, Flame," began Murdock, his manner tense over the sudden change in a situation which he had thought entirely under his control, "you'd show less feeling for——"

"And if you knew what I knew," the girl cut in, "you'd have escorted Mr. Childress to the home ranch instead of tricking him into this box canyon and trying to put a brand on him. Let me tell you one or two things that happened yesterday. He came riding across the range from his own ranch to ours. He found me trying to snag one of my cows out of a bog where the fool bossy had sanded herself in. My misdirected efforts would have hung the cow in a minute or two if our neighbor"—she accented this for the benefit of the trio and to the glad surprise of the sergeant—"hadn't

happened along. He waded into the bog and used his own hands as a shovel. Then he pushed and I pulled until we had her out. She'll probably be a total loss, but at least she'll pass out more naturally. Then a pair of buzzards attracted us and we came upon that poor steer—hided alive."

"We found the hide on this rustler's cayuse," inserted Murdock.

"He's not a rustler," flared Flame. "We both went after the brute who did that skinning—one on either side of the ridge that cuts in from the States. I rode to the line seeing nothing suspicious, then went home. Mr. Childress evidently got everything but his man. I'll bet he was headed for our ranch house when you scatter-brained roughnecks fell on him."

"Ain't this one hell of a mess?" muttered Rust to Roper as he coiled his string.

"You'll think you're in one hell of a mess for sure if you make any more mistakes," declared the girl. "Now take yourselves down to the lower ranch and see if you can't find some honest-to-goodness trouble." She turned to Childress. "I wish you would ride back with me; father's at home and I'd like you two real men to meet."

There was something of a groan from the handsome foreman, and she threw him a reproving look.

Then she mounted and the two were off, Childress again leading the cayuse that had been stolen. They were well into the open, the regal Silver and her well-groomed bay mare jogging in friendly fashion side by side on the trail to the home ranch, before he spoke.

"I can't seem to think of words with which to thank you, Miss Gallegher," he said with feeling.

"Suppose you don't try," she returned. "And while we're by ourselves out here in the wide-open suppose you call me 'Flame.' All my friends do and after all we've been through I rather reckon we're friends."

In this proposal she was as ingenuous as a child and it hit him hard—mostly around the heart. With uncalled for caution, he tried to keep from showing how pleased he was.

"I will if you'll swap, Flame of Fire Weed," he offered and wondered at his nerve in proposing a bargain to such as she.

"Swap—swap what?" she asked.

"Easy names—you call me Jack when we're alone."

"That day up in Strathconna, when you beat me to the section you now call the Open A, I was prepared to hate you and help the boys make life in the Fire Weed country miserable. But I've sort

176 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

of changed 'round, haven't I, *Jack*. I think you have a *way* with women, Mr. Jack."

"You certain have with me—men," he returned quickly. "Your arrival to-day was an unexpected deliverance, and the source of it beyond my wildest dreams. I'm going to make something out of that narrow escape, though. The threatened branding has given me an idea. Can you keep a secret, Flame?"

"What woman can't?" she taunted.

"Have you any idea how they meant to brand me—I mean with what ensignia?"

She shook her head.

"The artist was inspired to decorate my forehead with a horseshoe surrounding a Lazy G. Neat idea, wasn't it?"

The girl flushed with indignation over the outrage which these men of the Gallegher outfit had contemplated. "I'm ashamed of them. You'd been branded as a horse thief for life, whether you are——"

"Whether guilty or not," he completed for her, playing his whimsical grin.

"I wasn't going to say that," she protested, but it was evident that a dwindling possibility of his guilt still lingered in her mind. "Come, what is the

secret you want me to keep? What is the idea that you got from the interrupted branding?"

"We won't call it a secret," he said, "but a surprise for you—if the idea works out."

Flame did not answer at once. Her horse evidently needed all her attention, though the beast seemed to be behaving. He looked closely to see if she was pouting, but could identify no such expression. When she spoke again it was upon an unrelated subject and she kept the conversation thus until they made the home corrals.

There they found a puncher sitting straddle the top rail, braiding a horsehair rope—one that would serve as a saddle ornament on his trips to town, rather than as a practical implement of the range. He took charge of the captured cayuse and the retrieved hide, while Flame and the sergeant unsaddled their mounts and stabled them. Then they walked toward the larger of a cluster of log cabins, looking out upon a small lake which evidently had determined the location of the home ranch.

"Reckon we'll find dad out on the front porch," said the girl as they proceeded. "He's laid up with a bad leg, which isn't hurt as much as his pride. An outlaw caught him napping the other day and he hasn't been saddle-fit since. If he isn't exactly friendly, first off, blame it on his injured feelings."

He's not as young as he once was, but he still wonders how that horse ever managed to throw him, and wondering, he grumbles and growls."

Childress had no difficulty in identifying the three buildings of the group—one as cook-shack; the second, a bunk-house for the men; the third and most pretentious, the home of the owner and of Flame. Together they rounded the corner of the latter structure, although they might have gone through to the front porch, the doors standing open for a spring airing. Possibly, he thought, she did not care for the responsibility of asking a suspect, even one she had saved from disfigurement, to enter the Gallagher "mansion" until the head of the house had passed upon him. But once around the corner, the young woman stopped short. Standing out front with reins dropped were two saddle horses.

"Company!" came from her lips in exclamatory whisper.

At first glance Childress recognized one of the beasts. "The widow from Rafter A," he remarked and received a sharp, enquiring look for his display of knowledge.

"She never has frightened me," declared Flame. "Come on."

As a matter of fact, they already had been seen

and retreat would have been impossible, even if the girl had desired to avoid a meeting with her stunning neighbor and to hide the presence of that other neighbor who was under suspicion.

Upon the porch, one on either side of the long, lean, dark-visaged ranchman, sat Ethel Andress and her ranch manager, Fitzrapp. The latter rose instantly on seeing the daughter of the house and waited to be introduced. He quite ignored Childress. Sam Gallegher growled and did not leave his easy chair.

"This is Mrs. Andress of the Rafter and her manager, Fitzrapp," he said to Flame. "We've been discussing this damnable rustling situation."

"You don't need to introduce us," said the widow in a detached sort of way. "We've met before."

"Yes, we've met—the Lady Fair and the Gallegher Brat," returned Flame pleasantly enough. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Fitzrapp. Not often we have two distinguished callers at one and the same time. To-day we have three. Permit me to introduce Mr. Childress, of the Open A—Fire Weed's newest and smallest ranch."

Fitzrapp was making his best bow to the young woman of the ranch; the widow's expression clearly was one of amusement. So far as social experience

was concerned, she was somewhat in command of the situation.

"No need of introducing me to Mr. Childress," she trilled. "He saved my life the very first time he set eyes on me and in spite of all my protests."

"I thought those protests to be cries for help," put in the sergeant, never to be entirely "cut down," regardless of the situation.

"Yes—yes," mumbled Fitzrapp, twisting his silken mustache. "Most unfortunate—that break of yours on the Whitefoot reservation. Shouldn't have made it, old top."

Sam Gallegher seemed puzzled about much of this exchange, knowing nothing of the events that lay behind.

To Childress the two women presented a striking contrast as they stood facing each other, the outer advantage to her in the "latest" of city-made habits. Yet there was a certain calm, like that of the prairie's sweep, in the red-head that should have cheered the crusty parent. The fact that she rose superior to the drawbacks of a range upbringing—held up her head, in fact, as though the wrapped braids about it were a crown of red gold—lifted her above the class so often in error derisively called "ranch bred."

Probably Ethel Andress did not mean to be pa-

tronizing—indeed her smile and graceful advance seemed essentially friendly—but even before she spoke directly to Flame there was something in her manner which Childress did not approve.

“We’ve just been discussing with your father,” she began, “the advisability of asking the Royal Mounted to send some specials down here to put an end to this running our horse stock across the line to disappear in the American market. At just the right moment you ride in from somewhere with the only other ranchman in the Fire Weed country.” She favored Flame with one of her most exclusive smiles. “It would seem possible that we could make the appeal to Ottawa unanimous, if your friend——”

Flame was quick, as always. “I’m sure we can count on Mr. Childress to join in any unified action,” she said. “He just rode in with one of our horses that was stolen last Fall and packed on it was the mud-line hide of one of my steers. You’re for sending for the Mounted, aren’t you, Jack—Mr. Childress?”

“Oh—Jack!” The widow was quick.

“Don’t want any outsiders in on this,” grumbled Fitzrapp. “You shouldn’t have spilled the beans, Ethel.”

“About all from you, Tom!” The widow was

smiling. "Don't mind him," she said to Childress. "The only suspicion against you, so far as I've been able to learn, has been that beautiful horse you ride and the fact that you picked upon a section of land each of us thought the other owned. Glad you've made friends with Miss Gallegher." She turned to Flame. "You're supposed to be rather difficult, you know."

"Oh, we're not exactly friends," said the girl, laughing her richly modulated, mirthless laugh.

"Just happened to brush stirrups," supplied the sergeant readily. "But this idea of sending for the Mounted sounds well to me. What are the formalities?"

All this time there had been nothing more than a nod of greeting from Sam Gallegher, who sat in his chair, puffing with less content than usual at a clay pipe, the stem of which had been broken close to its blackened bowl. Now he straightened up, with a wince from the pain in his injured leg, and by the mere movement commanded the attention of all.

"Don't know what the Mounted can do when we don't seem to be able to do anything for ourselves," he began, his voice grumbling. "But I'll sign in on any application you want to make. We don't seem to be getting far on our own protection

account, and I'm thinking of something desperate, once this leg of mine gets saddle wise."

"What have you in mind, Gallagher?" asked the manager of Rafter A.

"That you'll know, Fitzrapp, when I've finished—or they've finished me. No less, I'll sign the application. How about you, small rancher, do you want the Mounted to send a special detail down into the Fire Weed?"

With difficulty Childress concealed his grin. "Sure," he said. "I've lost nothing as yet, but I've had nothing much to lose. So long as they're supposed to police the whole Dominion, we should be getting our share of their work. I'll sign anything you other owners will."

"Shouldn't have had everybody in on this," grumbled Fitzrapp. "The boys in scarlet will come down here and not know whom to suspect."

Childress took advantage of this slip. "So!" he remarked without bothering to raise eyebrows. "Is there some one under suspicion in this very delightful section of the province?"

"None but yourself," came promptly and quite aloud from Flame and he alone heard the softly breathed "Jack."

"They've had a patrol down here, these Royal Mounted fellows," said the old ranchman, between

puffs on a pipe that seemed never to go out, "but they never got anywhere. Perhaps they'll jack up if we all join in an appeal. There's nothing against this young fellow except that he rides a white horse."

"Silver," introduced Childress.

"You should see him, dad," came quickly from Flame. "He's out in the stable now and more wonderful, probably faster than any of our blacks."

"Faster?" the question came quickly from Fitzrapp. For the first time he really turned to Childress. "Do you mean you could and would race him, my man?"

The sergeant ignored the other's "my man" arrogance. "There's a track at Strathconna," he said quietly. "The next time we meet there, I'll match Silver against any horse in your string."

"I'll hold you to that, the next time we meet."

The old horseman recalled them to the matter in hand by asking Flame to bring writing material and take a dictation. When she was ready to write, he spoke slowly, but very much to the point. The others listened, offering no suggestions. Fitzrapp, frowning, twisted his mustache nervously. Ethel Andress gave several nods of approval as she listened to the veteran's terse dictation. Sergeant Childress was secretly amused at the situation.

Commissioner Jim up in Ottawa doubtless would get several chuckles out of one of his staff signing an appeal for additional patrol; then, probably, he would detail an inspector to visit the several complainants. None the less, he determined to hasten in every possible way his own investigation.


When Flame had finished writing and the signatures were duly appended there was ready for the mail a document of protest which read:


*To the Hon. Commissioner,
Royal Canadian Mounted Police,
Ottawa, Canada.*


SIR:—The devil's pot is boiling again in the Fire Weed country. Already this spring there have been two raids on our horse bands. Now they have taken to skinning our cattle for the hides.


Can nothing be done for our protection, or do you wish us to take the law into our own hands? The trouble seems to start and fade out across the line in the States; but surely we don't need to appeal to a foreign sheriff for aid. Do we get a patrol detachment, or don't we?

Respectfully submitted,

ETHEL ANDRESS, , *Rafter A.*

BERNICE (FLAME) GALLEGHER, , *Circle G.*

SAM GALLEGHER, , *Lazy G.*

JOHN CHILDRESS, , *Open A.*

As he owned no ranch, no stock and no brand of his own, Fitzrapp decided against signing the appeal. He intended, however, to ride the next day

to the railroad and would be glad to see that the letter was posted.

Gallegher shook his head. "I've got a horse and a wrangler that need exercise," he said. "We'll save a day by sending it over at once."

His bellowed summons brought the "China-boy" who helped the cook. An order was given. Soon a wrangler rode up from the corrals and the letter to the Mounted's chief of command was on its way with all the speed of pony express.

Then Flame Gallegher remembered her rôle of hostess and pressed the visitors from Rafter A ranch to remain for luncheon. First off, she thought that the widow was going to accept, but Fitzrapp was so positive that he must hurry back to the home ranch that both declined.

"And when you ride out again on social bent, Mr. Childress," smiled Mrs. Andress in parting, "don't forget that hospitality awaits on the other side of your little buffer ranch. We'll all be glad to see you at any time."

Flame managed to hide whatever interest she had, but secretly was none too pleased with Childress' hearty assurance that he would make his "first call" as soon as he got a roof on his ranch shack.

CHAPTER XV.

TRAPPING FOR PROOF.

DUNCAN O'HARA sat perched on the top rail of the Rafter A corral fence, puffing viciously at a burned out briar. He had just finished the most distasteful of the varied tasks that fell to the caretaker of the home ranch, the position to which Major MacDonald had demoted him on return of the family party from Strathconna a few weeks before, when he had been called upon to report the loss of more horse flesh to the rustlers. This task was the care of the orphan colts, of which the ranch harbored half a dozen. The range mare has no instinct of charity and has no mind for adoption, no matter how pitiful the circumstance. The foal which is orphaned must either be destroyed or fed cow's milk by hand. Hence the title of nursemaid, which went with the assignment.

The greenest range rider balked at this job, and Darned Cuss, the regular nurse, endured it only because it enabled him to be near his wife, who was the competent housekeeper of the home ranch. Assuredly it was no detail for a boss buster, and

O'Hara suffered keenly over the humiliation. His dignity would be weeks recovering, for the other hands would not let him forget it, even after Cuss had returned from the lower range to resume his undignified position.

All his life Dunc O'Hara had been "getting even" with somebody for something or other, and he was now engaged, with the aid of his pipe, in studying out the retaliation which this indignity demanded. At first he was puzzled as to whom he should get even with. Fitzrapp had drawn him into the mess and had not shouldered his full share of the responsibility over the winter's loss. For a time the buster's dark thoughts were directed against the handsome ranch manager. But he was aware of the folly of nose smiting. Fitzrapp had been kind to him in the past, and promised greater benefits for the future. Besides it was the major, the widow's uncle, who had issued the order sending Cuss into his saddle and him—O'Hara—to the milk bottle.

He had definitely decided to get even with the gray bearded veteran when his attention was drawn from various forms of possible requital by the sound of horses loping up the rise from the creek trail. He looked up to see Fitzrapp and Cuss returning, accompanied by Season's Greetings, a mis-

named half-breed wrangler who had been riding the ranch limits to search for strays.

Greetings, as was his uproarious habit, covered the last hundred yards at a dead run and dashed into the yard with a "Whoop-la-la!" worthy of his Comanche ancestors on his mother's side of a rather indefinite house.

Knowing what to expect from the breed, Duncan O'Hara was discreet and offered no salutation.

"Well, if here ain't old Mother O'Hara!" cried the wrangler, as though suddenly aware of his presence on the fence. "Am I in time to help with the milkin', ma?"

Darned Cuss was but a moment behind, and his query, though possibly honest, was no less disquieting.

"How are the orphans, Dunc?" he asked, with a serious face, even before he dismounted. "I've been a-worryin' some about that little brindle feller."

"The colts is all right, Darned," said O'Hara sulkily, "though as a truthful gent I've got to admit they been whinnyin' for their regular bottle holder."

Fitzrapp merely nodded to him and went on to the stable with his horse. When he came out a few minutes later O'Hara was still hunched on the

fence like a sick crow. The ranch manager went over to him and put a friendly inquiry. O'Hara grunted some unintelligible reply.

"Come out of the dumps, old topper," said Fitzrapp persuasively, "I'm bringing the major around in good shape and have talked him out of his rage. He's convinced you did the best you could under the circumstances and with the small force we left you. He's sorry he fell on you so hard, and if he doesn't make it up to you, I assuredly will. Anything new?"

"Nothin' much." O'Hara looked a shade more cheerful.

"No strangers about the ranch?"

"Only that feller from Montana you was tellin' me about—the one what rides the silver stallion."

Fitzrapp started. "You don't mean it! When was he here? Has he gone?"

O'Hara took his time about relighting the crusted briar. "Oh, he didn't show up here at the ranch," he said; and then he told in detail about the new settler over in the cup.

"How did you happen to stumble on this?" Fitzrapp asked after a moment in which he was engaged trying to work out a cross-word puzzle of his own.

"Well," drawled the chief buster, "you tells me

to keep an eye on our widow, didn't you? The other day she gets sort of restless and sends for her cayuse. I gives her a good start and then trails, not because I think she's up to anything, but just to get away from them confounded bawlin' colts."

"Up to anything, O'Hara?" demanded Fitzrapp, instantly disturbed. "What do you mean, man?"

The disgruntled buster seemed not to note his chief's annoyance. "Well, Mrs. Andress sure was up to somethin'," he continued. "She rides straight across the range to the bluff that looks down into his cup o' hills, just as if meetin' him was all cut and dried and tied up with blue ribbons. She stands the cayuse there for quite a bit, and I makes cover farther along the bluff. She was watchin' the man trim an outlaw, she was, and I'm here to say he done it proper."

"And then?" urged Fitzrapp, glancing nervously toward the house, where no one seemed to have noticed their return.

"Oh, then she slides the cayuse into the basin and enjoys a nice friendly visit with his nibs. When she starts home, he goes to playin' with a hound-dog as though he was tickled pink."

The ranch manager was frowning now, but not

at Duncan O'Hara. "How do you know he's the man I told you of? Are you absolutely sure?"

"He wore all the marks that you'd calculate on seein' from my distance, but I'm countin' more on the stallion what was staked out near the cabin he's buildin'. Never seen a finer chunk of horse-flesh. He's him, all right, unless you shuffled in the discard when picturin' of him to me."

"Say nothing of this to any one, O'Hara. I'll see you after supper." Fitzrapp strode off toward the house muttering to himself. "So Ethel rode over to see this railroad nester, did she? And she just didn't think to mention it after we saw him yesterday at Gallegher's. Now, Childress, you upstart, I'll have to get the goods on you!"

When he entered the living room the place seemed deserted. "Oh, I say, Ethel!" he called out cheerily. "Where are you?"

The girl started up from a reclining chair behind the curtains of a deep bay window, where she had been sitting in the warmth of the afternoon sun, now dipped behind the Rockies.

"Hello, Tom," she greeted him. "I didn't hear any one ride in. Must have been nodding over this impossible book."

"What have you been doing with your precious self?"

"Except for our interesting ride to Gallegher's, mighty little, I must admit. The ranch is about as exciting as an irrigation project with you all away. I slept—you caught me at that; I read, and I rode a little. If this rustler scare is going to depopulate the home ranch, one of two things is going to happen to Ethel. Either I get in on the fighting or I'll go up to Strathconna and visit somebody."

"Didn't run across any strangers on your rides?" he asked, and waited with no little concern for her answer. If she told him, even thus belatedly, of her visit to Childress' "hole in," his alarm on her account well might be unfounded, he argued. If she kept silent, then he was not alarmed enough.

"Strangers—out in this wilderness? What a chance!" she evaded easily. "Who did you think I might have seen?"

It seemed to him that her eyes narrowed as she asked. He closed his own that they might not tell of his disappointment. "Didn't know but that some scout of the horse thieves had been pestering around," he returned, with an easy manner he was far from feeling. "I'm fagged out, Ethel. I'll have a tub and if you can persuade Mrs. Cuss to advance dinner half an hour my appetite will thank you. Your uncle has ridden to Preston's and won't be home until sometime to-morrow."

Once in the privacy of the hall his face took on a haggard look. His disappointment in Ethel was staggering. Her evasion revealed a state of feeling toward him which he did not care to contemplate. Unless he could hold her, unless he finally won her consent to marry him, all the effort of these years in the province would count for little.

What did it all mean? She had deliberately refrained from telling him of her visit to the Open A. Had she and Childress, by any chance, met before that day on the reservation? Could she be so openly under the spell of Childress' undoubted fascination as to be willing to overlook the suspicion, freely expressed by himself, that he was the leader of the rustlers from Montana?

As he entered his own room a jealous rage swept over him. A chance glance into the mirror on his bureau showed him the anger that blazed in his eyes, and he recognized in the look the passion that drives men to kill.

He drew himself up quickly. "Here, old man," he said to himself, "this will not do. Keep cool and get this interloper. You've got to get him!"

As he changed from dusty riding clothes to loose flannels he decided on his course of action. Ethel Andress was playing some sort of a game, but just what sort it was he could not guess. Very

well; he, too, could disguise his hand. He would give no hint that he suspected any dissembling on her part. Then he would seek out Dunc O'Hara and between them they would bait a trap that Childress would certainly spring. Once in his clutches there would be no escape for his rival so far as the widow was concerned. And if the major took the law into his own hands with the American's life as a forfeit—well, he had to win Ethel Andress, that was all. There was quite too much at stake for him to be squeamish over the means by which he won her.

CHAPTER XVI.

CLEAN AS A HOUND'S TOOTH.

HAVING sent Constable Mahaffy with the team to the railroad for supplies and a small shipment of furniture, Sergeant Childress slept in the half-roofed cabin alone, except for the hound. He had been slumbering for hours when the restless movements and low whining of the dog awakened him. Where his master was concerned, Poison never asserted himself without reason. This his owner had learned to consider, although sometimes he failed to fathom it. Half rising from out his blankets, he struck a match and looked at his watch. The hour was nearly one in the morning, and the light of the half moon poured in through the unfinished portion of the roof.

"Whimpering at the moon, you blithering old alarm clock?" he demanded; but, as he grew more fully awake, he realized that Poison was far too wise to be disturbed by Luna, even when she appeared in all her splendor. Pulling on his corduroys and boots, Childress slipped a .45 into his belt and went out to investigate, the hound licking his heels in approval of the move.

His first interest was Silver, picketed up the creek. As he approached the animal which, with association, was winning his increasing interest, he heard a whistling snort. The sergeant recognized in this not a sound of fright or defiance, but the beast's invitation to its kind. In the moonlight he saw that the horse's ears were pointing toward the upper rim of the cup in an attitude of eager listening, and that he pawed the prairie with an impatient forefoot. The possibility that strays, seeking a change of grass, had headed into his fertile basin was the first supposition. Under ordinary circumstances this need not have kept him longer from his blankets, as their dislodgment could have awaited the daylight. But he knew the horse bands that ranged thereabouts bore either the Andress or the Gallegher brand. In view of the double warning that he was under suspicion, he did not care to have them found on his newly-acquired property.

Taking up a rope that was looped over the firmly planted post to which the stallion was picketed, he strode toward the upper basin, the hound at his heels.

The dozen mares, with their colts, which he had bought and driven in as the foundation of the Open A herd, were grazing peacefully in the upper pasture, and his count showed the presence

198 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

of no outsiders. He was about to turn back, in the belief that for once the hound had yielded to canine aversion for moonlight, when his nostrils detected a foreign odor in the air of the soft Chinook wind that blew.

He sniffed and sniffed again. "Plug cut!" he murmured under his breath. "Plug cut blazing in a pipe! Somebody's enjoying a smoke up that ravine."

At this time of night no other human should have been within miles of the spot. Indeed, at any hour the presence of a stranger in that side ravine, far removed from any trail, would demand explanation. As rapidly as possible he got out of the moonlight.

Under cover of the shadows thrown by the creek's cottonwood fringe, he advanced with cautious, noiseless tread to the edge of the ravine, which was really a miniature basin connected with the main one by a narrow gap. There he saw twelve or fifteen horses, most of them cropping the luxuriant growth underfoot.

At first his eyes discerned no human figure, though the scent of tobacco could be accounted for only by the presence of man. Then he detected a movement in the shadows on the far side of the ravine, near its mouth. The next moment a short,

spare figure, which he did not recognize, stepped into view.

Childress saw the intruder tie a rope around a slender birch, run a line to its neighbor, and then start across the ravine, paying out the rope as he progressed. It was evident that he was improvising a corral for the strange stock in the gully; but why the animals were there was as much a mystery as the stranger himself.

The sergeant was puzzled as to his procedure. There might be a plausible and satisfactory explanation for this strange action, in which case he would regret shooting a trespasser. On the other hand, he did not wish to be shot down himself, which was possible, if he stopped to ask questions which might require embarrassing answers. Moreover, there was that never-fire-first rule of the Mounted. The short man was coming rapidly toward him, and he had but a moment for decision.

His shooting hand was reaching for his gun when he recalled the quieter and most effective method of capture used on himself only a few days before. His aim with the rope was as sure as that of his revolver. Not for nothing had he patrolled the Cypress Hills in his younger service days. Silently he adjusted the running knot into a sizable loop and shook out the strands.

200 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

When the oncomer was within a dozen yards of him he made his cast, the rope cutting through the air with a hiss that was startling in the nocturnal quiet. It settled over the intruder's shoulders before he realized what was happening, and a sharp jerk, into which Childress threw all his strength, drew the noose taut and effectively pinioned the other's arms, making it impossible for him to draw a weapon.

With the strike, Childress shouted: "Easy there, stranger, and you won't hurt yourself!"

The man who had been lassoed made no response, but began to thrash about in an effort to free himself. Resenting this struggle, Poison dashed into the open and assailed the captive with ferocious growls. Not being a man hunter, he refrained from closing in, as he would have done had the rope held a bear or a cougar, but he aided his master by diverting the attention of the struggler from the rope.

Childress began to work up on the string hand over hand, as he would have done had some outlaw horse been at the other end, not for one instant slackening the tie of the noose. It can't be said that his lessons in man roping were long past history, considering the way in which the Lazy G outfit had taken him. In his present effort he was

abetted by the fact that his captive seemed anxious only to get away, and made no forward rush in attack. He was soon close enough to throw a fresh loop about the intruder, and then another which determined the issue of the capture. Reaching out he slipped the other's gun from its hip holster and was ready for parley.

He turned the pinioned one around until the moon lighted his face, and then started back in surprised recognition.

"You—O'Hara!" he exclaimed. "What the devil brings you across my trail?"

He knew the man—scarcely could have forgotten him since some years before, at no little risk to the integrity of his own hide, he had saved him from an enraged mob at end of steel on the Trans-continental railroad.

"I never knowed it was you, pard," the captive said huskily, "or I'd 'a' gone on a scout before tryin' to jam you. Call off your hound and slack the rope. I'll put you wise to something you'd ought to know."

Having the full measure of the man he had snared, from past experience with him, Childress did not hesitate to order Poison to heel, and then he loosened his lariat.

Duncan O'Hara stretched his arms and rubbed

202 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

his shoulders and chest, where the rope had cut. "You shore sprung a surprise snappin' that string around me, pard. When did you bust off from the straight and narrow?"

"I don't get that question," declared Childress, "any more than I do your midnight corral making."

"I mean when did you get outside the law?"

"So far as you're concerned in this deal, I'm not outside the law," returned the sergeant. "What's the game?"

O'Hara found a seat on a tree stump and relighted his faithful pipe.

"This here's a plant," he began, "and as pretty a one as a jealous four-flusher ever worked out. You listen to me and I'll spill it to you on the level. I ain't forgettin' what you done, pullin' me out of that skin-tight hole of a necktie party down in the States."

"I'm listening," said Childress shortly. "Give me all of it."

"For a runnin' start then, I've become range boss for the Rafter A outfit, and I'm wise to everything. They're convinced that you've been runnin' their stock down to the 'Medicine Line' and gettin' away with it. Naturally you're too plumb wise to let them get the goods on you, so Fitzrapp is in for manufacturin' the evidence and puttin' the

hawse-thief brand on you for fair. I'm just drawin' good wages and takin' bad orders.

"Tom Fitzrapp says," Duncan O'Hara continued, "'Take a bunch of our two-year-olds and corral them in that there Yankee's ravine. A rope will do the corralin' trick.' There are the beauties." He gestured to the shadowy forms of the horses. "All of them rope-wise and saddle-broke, worth a big roll of anybody's money. I was makin' the corral with my lariat when you came snooping along at an hour when you had ought to been doin' nothing more strenuous than snorin'. Early in the mornin', it's writ on the program, Fitzrapp and MacDonald and a witness are goin' to swoop down on the Open A cup, uncover the evidence and nab you dead to rights. You'll get twenty years, if the old man doesn't shorthorn your term by lendin' you the loads of his gun."

"Is Maj. MacDonald in this?" Childress asked sharply, recalling the pleasant ride he had enjoyed with the veteran the morning of their first and only meeting.

"Not in the plant, I reckon, 'cause he's square and through with young love. But once he sees the evidence, you can bet your ace he'll be ready to shoot the lights out of you. 'Twas Tom Fitzrapp what planned the sanded deck."

204 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"Could expect it of him," muttered the sergeant.

There was admiration in the grin that played about O'Hara's mouth once the pipe was removed.

"Say, pard, you're packin' a powerful heavy jag o' nerve to hole in here right under their noses," he declared. "I plumb admire to know you. But why did you make the doggie break of hobblin' yourself with that skirt?"

Childress' hand clamped upon O'Hara's lean shoulder roughly. "What do you mean by 'that' skirt?"

"Why the gal—the major's niece," said the range boss hastily, cringing under the clutch. "I mean the widow—Lady Ethel. Wasn't you wise that Fitzrapp had cut her out for hisself? I was scoutin' from the bluff the day she rid over here. Was too far away to recognize your face, and never havin' seen you bustin' broncs before I didn't know you by yore tricks. Not knowin' you was you, I spills it to his nibs about the girl's little excursion. If it hadn't been for that, I doubt if he'd have found the nerve to frame this on you. He's plumb set on marryin' the girl."

"Which he'll never do," Childress murmured under his breath. For O'Hara's benefit he forced a laugh. "Leave the woman out of this. If they're

going to raid me in the morning, it's time I was getting shut of the evidence."

"I'll sit in that game and draw cards cheerful," declared O'Hara eagerly. "The old major has set me nursemaidin' colts and I'm plumb ready to quit. Here's a picked bunch of hawses, and I present them to you gratis. Bunch them up with your own and run them across the line. You can turn them over quick at Crow's Nest, and make a clean get-away. Hawse thieves ain't goin' to be folks in this here province for a spell.

"And what's more——" O'Hara hesitated, torn between his native greed and a desire to do a whole-souled, handsome thing in repaying the debt he owed. "And what's more," he resumed, with a leer for conquered avarice, "I'll help you drive them and ask nary a cut of the clean-up."

Childress stood hesitating, seemingly pondering over this daring proposal. "I'm not ready to pull up stakes yet," he said finally. "There's more than one skirt, as you call the ladies fair, in the Fire Weed country."

"You're still thinkin' of that there widow," said O'Hara, with an air of conviction. "Forget her. You couldn't never show a pedigree that'd pass muster."

The sergeant did not mention the possibility that

he had been thinking of Flame Gallegher the last moment. Instead he suddenly demanded to know how many horses made up the "plant."

"Fifteen—first graders, every one."

Again Childress considered, and this time he seemed to reach a decision. "It's not a big enough haul. When I clean up I want to do it proper. We'll drive these long-tails back to their own range before daylight and I'll bluff it out."

"Then it's yours truly, D. O'Hara for the long scout," said the professional buster mournfully.

"Not if you really want to square our little account."

"You sure did save my worthlittle hide," admitted O'Hara. "What's the ante this time?"

"Go back to Rafter A and manage to keep me posted without letting any of them, not even the widow, know that we're acquainted. They're not going to stop with this attempt to get me. When I'm ready to strike hard and for the last time, I'll declare you in on the game and with a fair share of the pot."

O'Hara had but one objection to offer. If anything went wrong with the "plant," he had promised to return and advise Fitzrapp, who would not bring the major to search the basin that comprised the Open A. In that event Childress would lose the

opportunity of appearing innocent. The buster feared, if he delayed his return until after the raid had failed, he would himself be under suspicion and his ability to aid his debtor handicapped.

"We can wipe that difficulty off the slate, old topper," was the sergeant's quick return. "If you get careless with your mount after we've driven these horses back to the main band, you'll have to walk home, won't you? Can't catch a range horse without a rope, and yours will be carried away on your saddle. It's fifteen miles across the range to the home ranch, and traveling on shank's mare you can't possibly cover the distance in time to do any effective warning that'll bother me."

"I begin to see," said O'Hara without elation, and the cause of his gloom easily may be surmised by any one who knows why the average puncher's legs are more or less bowed.

Childress started to saddle Silver, entirely confident that Duncan O'Hara could be trusted to liquidate his debt along the lines he had laid down. More than once were his heart throbs of satisfaction at the opportunity thus presented to foil the trick of one who meant more to him than a rival for any woman's hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

CALLING A BLUFF.

RIDING together as they crossed the range in the early morning, Maj. Ivan MacDonald and Thomas Fitzrapp conversed with sobered faces and in a tone that did not carry back to Darned Cuss, who brought up the rear, as became his subdued nature and the rôle of witness, which had been assigned to him. All three were well mounted and all armed for serious business, which their visit to the Open A Ranch promised to be.

"Lord Harry, Major, but won't it be a relief to be freed of this rustler pest?" Fitzrapp was saying as they drew near to the gap which served as the entrance to Childress' ranch.

"Time enough to congratulate ourselves when we've turned the trick, Thomas," said MacDonald, stroking his close-cropped beard. "I've been disappointed so many times that this discovery of O'Hara's seems too good to be true. By the way, the buster didn't come in during the night, did he?"

"Wasn't expected to unless the situation in the basin underwent a change. If this morning's work

results as I expect it to, we'll have to reward that young range rider handsomely for his scouting."

MacDonald nodded agreement. "Yet it scarcely seems reasonable that the scoundrels would try so raw a deal," he said doubtfully.

"They probably expect to win out through their very daring," argued Fitzrapp. "What could be bolder than taking up a ranchhold on the very edge of our range, the nearest section that's for sale? That fellow Childress has nerve enough for anything. Signed that round-robin asking the Mounted to send a patrol here—signed it, as I told you without crinkling an eyebrow."

"What a pity the man isn't honest, Fitzrapp," remarked the pioneer. "It's just his sort of nerve, ridden on a straight track, that makes for big success. And what's the reward for all this criminal activity? A few thousand easy dollars that have to be divided seven ways, and in the end the surety of being caught either by a parcel of lead or a tie-rope strangle or years in prison. God knows I'm no saint any more than I am a preacher, Thomas, but that honesty-the-best policy lingo is not foolish chatter. Someway I can't believe Childress a crook. That day riding in from the Whitefoot he looked and talked too sensibly to follow any such fool trail as rustling."

"I've seen more of him than you have, Major," said Fitzrapp. "I only wonder he hasn't applied for board at the Rafter A or tried to hire on as a contract buster."

Although the ranch manager undoubtedly did not intend it to be anything of the sort, this last item of surprise was quite a compliment. A "contract buster" is an expert rider who undertakes the breaking of horses at so much a head, and signs off all employer's liability before he draws his first cinch.

"I'm more surprised," Fitzrapp continued, "that he's made such an impression upon our wonderful Ethel. I happen to know on undoubted authority—"

"Dunc O'Hara?" cut in the major.

Fitzrapp nodded. "I happen to know that she's seen him alone since he came into the Fire Weed. And the other day over at Gallegher's she actually begged that he make his next social call in the direction of the Rafter A."

"Jealous again, Tom," said the handsome old major with a smile. "When you're as old as I am you'll have learned that there's no accounting for the freaks of winds, wives or widows."

They rode on in silence, increasing their speed as they entered the draw. They came up to the half-finished cabin at a lope, to find Childress in

the act of finishing his breakfast. Neither surprise nor restraint showed in his greeting, although he looked mildly curious.

"You're riding early this morning, Major MacDonald," he remarked, when they had declined his invitation to dismount.

"Mayhap you've heard what the early bird catches," Fitzrapp put in, for which he received a frown of caution from the veteran.

"There has been some straying from my niece's two-year-old band," returned MacDonald, his manner courteous, his tone casual. "I didn't know but that they might have wandered into your basin. Fitzrapp and I thought to have a look."

"More than welcome," Childress assured him. "If there are any two-year-olds on the Open A, they don't belong to me. A few mares with colts, the stallion over there, and the team that's now on a trip to the railroad are the extent of my horse stock at present. Later on I hope to branch out a bit, but always there must be a beginning."

The sergeant's attention was diverted by the old hound, which was making extravagant efforts to express his approval of MacDonald by leaping against the horse in an obvious attempt to lick the rider's hand. Evidently the performance was de-

212 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

cidedly objectionable to the rangy bay which the stockman rode.

"Hyah, you Poison, quit being a variegated nuisance!" Childress shouted. "That hound-dog certainly is violent in his fancies," he remarked as the beast returned to him with a reluctant whine. "If you'll wait until I throw a saddle on Silver, I'll ride along with you."

A smile of satisfaction crossed Fitzrapp's face. Because of the fact that O'Hara had not returned with any alarming word, he felt certain that the trap could be sprung according to program.

As Childress strode off, Fitzrapp said in an undertone to MacDonald: "We've got him, Major. He's running a bluff thinking we won't look into that side ravine where he's hidden the stolen stock. Watch him try to head us off when I suggest looking there, and be prepared to listen to some glib excuses when we uncover the lifted blacks. This is going to be as good as a drama."

There was no question about the ranch manager's expectations. Obviously he was prepared to enjoy to the utmost the discomfiture of this unknown who had dared arouse the interest of the incomparable Ethel, long the object of his own devotions. He believed that nothing could now save Childress from exposure and disgrace.

The four reached the upper pasture; Darned Cuss, still silent and watchful, riding in the rear to cover Childress on his first move toward his gun. There the suspect drew rein. With a wave of his hand he indicated a dozen mares and some young colts which stared with up-pointing ears at the party interrupting their breakfast.

"No strays here, Major MacDonald, as you can see for yourself," he remarked, with a smile that seemed a trifle too bland.

"Isn't that a ravine heading into the bluff over there to the right?" queried Fitzrapp, his eyes upon Childress rather than in the direction of his gesture.

"A bit of a one," returned the owner of the Open A easily, "but you'll find nothing there. It's a regular garden patch of fire weed, and you must know that horses won't even nibble at that."

"Tell you better whether there are strays or not after we've looked," said Fitzrapp pointedly, spurring his mount toward the ravine, his heart exultant over the trap that was about to be sprung to the permanent elimination of his rival from the widow competition.

At a more leisurely pace, the others followed; Childress with an inscrutable expression, though offering no further objection. Seeing that Fitzrapp

214 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

had ridden into the ravine, Cuss nerved himself for the outbreak that might be expected from the interloper when a shout announced the discovery that was promised. He was quite ready to demonstrate that he had not outgrown his proven speed and skill with the gun. The major, too, was watchful.

But no shout came to their ears, and presently Fitzrapp returned, only partly banishing a crest-fallen expression that gloomed his face. Under his breath he was muttering maledictions upon the general inefficiency of Duncan O'Hara, and gulping back his regret over the failure of the coup he had planned so carefully.

"The ravine is empty," he remarked, his voice well under control. "Our strays couldn't have come this way."

"We'll have to search elsewhere," said the major, turning his mount toward the mouth of the basin. "Expect to remain here long, Childress?"

"Who knows but that I'll become a fixture if I can make the amount of the payments to the railroad company and a living besides," was the half serious return. "The basin will support a band sufficient to enable me to raise a few high-bred animals each year, rather than many nondescript ones. I believe that is where the money lies in the future."

"And have the rustlers take your profits!" exclaimed Fitzrapp, who was disturbed by MacDonald's interested expression and eager to keep the horse thief idea before his mind.

"They'll have to take me into camp first," the sergeant declared, his eyes glittering dangerously.

"Superb actor," thought Fitzrapp, and he began to cast about for some lead that would break down the reserve of this competent individual whom he had come to hate so bitterly.

The major nodded approvingly. "You've got the right idea, neighbor," he observed to Fitzrapp's increased discomfiture. "The day of range breeding is passing with the advancing wave of wheat and mixed farming. It won't be long until the oldest of us are digging post holes and stringing barbwire. As I believe I observed once before, that's a fine animal you ride."

The sergeant's face beamed at this tribute to Silver. "He is that! Think I'll have to take him up to Strathconna's industrial exposition next June and show him off. His record shows that he's never been beaten."

Fitzrapp thought he saw a chance. "Then perhaps there was something serious behind that offer to race my horse that you made over at Gallegher's

216 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

the other day. Have you any money to say that the silver beast can't be made to take the dust?"

The major said nothing, merely looking his disapproval of this boast and counter-boast.

Into Childress's face came a shrewd look as he answered. "I staked my saddle on Silver a few years ago, and I'm still riding the same leather. Suppose I could scrape up a thousand to say that he hasn't forgotten how to run. You have a horse in mind, Fitzrapp?"

"My stallion, Canada, will make yours look like a selling plater," was the eager declaration. "I'll back him for any amount, any distance, any time and any place."

Fitzrapp personally owned the horse of which he spoke, a thoroughbred black which had shown speed and was now at the Rafter A. He had no idea that Childress actually would come to terms and arrange a race, but he hoped to discredit the stranger in the eyes of the major, who had no use for a man who boasted of his horse and then was unwilling to back him.

"Fair enough," murmured the sergeant. "Will you ride him yourself?"

"Gladly," declared the ranch manager, thinking that the other was seeking a loophole of escape.

"That is, of course, provided you ride your own horse."

"Silver would scarcely perform at his best for anyone else," said Childress, smiling. "I'm not a betting man, Mr. Fitzrapp, having had my lesson and memorized it, but I'll contribute a thousand dollars to a purse if you'll do the same, and we'll ride it out, winner take all."

"The amount is small," hedged Fitzrapp.

"Didn't suppose we were out for mere money in this instance," countered Silver's owner. "Thought we were wanting to demonstrate horse supremacy. And you have a bit the edge on me, for you've seen my horse and I've never laid eyes on yours. I mentioned a thousand-dollar contribution, as that happens to be the amount named in the one certificate of deposit I have on a Strathconna bank. Of course, if you've changed your mind——"

"I wouldn't want Canada to race in public for such a small sum," returned Fitzrapp, "but if you'll make it a private race and run it in Strathconna, say the day before the exposition opens, I'll be more than glad to take you on."

This proposition was accepted by Childress with a readiness that did not increase the challenger's peace of mind. At that particular time he could ill

218 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

afford to lose even the thousand, despite the superior manner with which he had complained over the small amount of the purse. After all, he knew absolutely nothing about the speed qualities of the silver stallion, and, while Canada ran exceedingly well at times, the animal possessed a capricious streak that gave any contest in which he was involved an element of dangerous doubt. Fitzrapp had, however, gone too far to back down before the major.

"Will Mr. MacDonald suit you as purse holder?" he asked.

"I'll ask none better," came ready agreement.

A little later, when they drew up before the half completed cabin, Childress went inside and returned with a certificate of deposit which he endorsed to MacDonald, after setting forth the conditions of the race upon its back.

"I haven't a check book in these riding togs," apologized Fitzrapp, "but I guess the major will take my I O U until I can cover properly."

"Unless Childress enters objection," said MacDonald, "I'll be glad to guarantee your share of the purse. But I would suggest that it would be more satisfactory all around if he can ride over to our place within the next day or two and we'll draw up a formal agreement. To my mind he's entitled to look over Canada so long as you've seen the

opposing horse, Thomas. Do you suppose you could get away to-morrow or the next day, Mr. Childress?"

Several things combined to bring forth a ready acceptance from the sergeant. One was the shadow of disapproval that rested on Fitzrapp's face. Another was the hope that the visit would bring about further meeting with Mrs. Address in whom he felt an interest that refused to be subjugated by any argument of common sense—an interest that would not yield to the more vivid impression made upon him by his debtor, the flame girl from Lazy G.

"Make it day after to-morrow," he said cheerfully. "My outfit—my one wrangler—will have returned from the railroad by that time, and I can get away." And all the time an inner voice kept telling him that he was only making trouble for himself in that a sergeant of the Scarlet had no business cultivating an interest in any woman, much less tantalizing himself with two.

The Rafter A party were on the open range outside Childress' basin when MacDonald spoke.

"I'm afraid you were a bit rash in that challenge, Thomas. The silver beast is a runner or I'm no judge of horse flesh, and that chap will ride him to the last kick. It's not going to help you any with

Ethel to have Childress trim you. Already she's showing an interest in him that's not so good."

"I've confidence in Canada and I'm used to track racing," returned the ranch manager, still chagrined over the unexpected invitation which the major had extended. "But, hell, we need not trouble our minds over any race with that rustler! He'll never dare show up at the track. We'll surely have the evidence against him by that time."

"We've secured a fine lot of evidence this morning," retorted MacDonald, in a sarcastic vein which he seldom used. "What do you suppose became of those horses O'Hara saw in that ravine?"

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed Fitzrapp.

"Wonder if O'Hara is really on the level," mused the major audibly. "His looks are against him, and he hails from over in the States, where all our troubles come from."

Fitzrapp entered a prompt defence of the head buster, and MacDonald dropped the subject with the remark that he would make another tally of the two-year-old band that afternoon.

"How did you ever come to invite Childress to visit the home ranch?" Fitzrapp's disturbed meditations finally forced the question.

"Why not? I asked him to the house up in

Strathconna and there's been nothing proven against him since."

"But to open your door to one under such a cloud."

"You opened the door yourself, Fitzrapp, by challenging him to a gentleman's race," said the older man with an air of finality. "You needn't be around when he comes if you're so finical about your associates. I can show him your black and act as your representative in the matter of terms."

Fitzrapp's further grumblings were wisely mental and addressed to fate, which of late had been playing him sorry tricks. The one thing he had gained from the morning's effort was a renewed determination to press his suit for the hand of Ethel Andress with all the vigor he dared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RUSTLED TO A FINISH.

RECLINING on a steamer chair, Ethel Andress sat upon the porch of her log ranch house and gazed with an anxious expression down the wide valley toward the United States. From time to time she transferred her gaze to a scrap of paper, evidently torn from some memorandum book, which she held in her slender hand. The writing on it was hurried, but the chirography familiar. The intermittent repetition of the reading eventually attracted the attention of her uncle, who sat beside her in a rustic rocking-chair, pretending to be interested in the latest copy of an Ottawa newspaper that had reached Rafter A.

"Haven't you memorized Fitzrapp's message by this time?" he asked in a bantering tone. "You've read it through often enough since the Indian hiked home with it."

For answer, she read the note again, this time aloud:

Band of five, well mounted, have just crossed the ford. Seem to be making for the two-year-olds. Unquestionably

the old rustling outfit. Season's Greetings and I are going after them and won't spare lead. Promise our best to land them this time. My love to you, Ethel.

This disturbing missive had been brought to the ranch house the evening before by an Indian boy who declared that he had been riding hard since early afternoon, to the truth of which statement the drooping ears, limp tail and hard breathing of his pony bore mute evidence. The messenger had been unable or unwilling to add any details, except that the white bosses, one of whom was Fitzrapp, had made smoke riding toward the invaders.

"If Tom was so desperately anxious to land the rustlers, he might have left off the last five words," remarked the widow.

Her uncle looked his disapproval. "You're peeved again with poor Fitz? Seems to me you're pretty hard on him lately, considering all his devotion." And then the handsome old pioneer turned away to enjoy a smile. He had lived his loves in his day and knew the price that must be paid by a mere male with aspiration, ambition, and a pain in his heart.

"There is a time for everything, uncle," was her return. "I'll give him the high sign when—if ever—I'm ready to hear further on that love-to-Ethel subject."

Uncle Ivan was too wrought up over the news of a new raid upon his fair relative's stock for his mind to be troubled long over the widow's capriciousness. A menacing look came into his eyes as they followed the creek trail to the south.

"Isn't it just my confounded luck to be laid up here in a rocking-chair when those mangy coyotes get busy again?" He spoke this ferociously. "If I hadn't been so plumb stubborn against 'squeezing Lizzie,' I'd have ridden that bronc."

The week before he had gone to Corn Cob Basin to look over the band of yearlings which had been wintered there under hired herders from the Indian reservation. He had become disgusted at their clumsy efforts to break an "outlaw," and, forgetting his years, had taken the beast in hand. Ethel knew his horror of "pulling leather," which is range argot for seizing any part of the saddle. From his remark about "squeezing Lizzie," she understood that he might have saved himself a fall and the sprained knee which at present disabled him by laying hold on the saddle horn.

She had a tolerant smile for his equestrian vanity, and replied sympathetically: "Anyway, you defended your faith once more, and that's something! The boys ought to give a good account of

themselves in this brush. They seem to have had warning enough."

"If they'll only shoot!" exclaimed the major.

"Aversion to pulling a trigger is one of several things I don't understand about Tom Fitzrapp," said Ethel thoughtfully. "I wonder if he's gun shy. I've long been convinced that Season's Greetings is an old four-flusher, although he looks capable of any atrocity. They've both had chances at these horse thieves before, but we never hear of any casualty list. Sometimes I'm afraid that Tom is too soft-hearted for a real man."

"Men aren't what they used to be, Ethel," the pioneer replied. "Even the Indians and most half-breeds of to-day are more streaked with yellow than red. When I was young—— Well, I'm not too old to show them yet. If the boys come back this time without a scalp, I'm going down into Montana after the scoundrels myself."

The weeks had passed swiftly since the men of Ethel Andress' outfit had returned empty-handed from their raid on the Open A. Despite her hatred of rustlers, the widow had not found it in her heart to grieve that the evidence of stolen horses was wanting. For one thing, she was not displeased that Thomas Fitzrapp should occasionally be disturbed from the pedestal of self-sufficiency upon

which she thought him too prone to climb. Again, as her relative and her ranch manager had enforced the handicap of her sex by insisting that she remain at home, a proceeding which she always resented, she was glad that their sortie had proved a failure.

With a fresh tingling of nerves, she recalled now her surprise when John Childress had ridden into the yard a few days after the raid, and gravely saluted her as she sat alone on the porch. She still felt that her uncle or Fitzrapp might have warned her that the stranger was expected. But this they had not done, and she had been forced to make the best of her least becoming frock and a disarray of the hair that was far from what she would have wished. She had set down to his credit the fact that he seemed not to notice these defects in the least, but had spent an hour with her in animated converse, until the return of the men revealed the real reason behind his call.

Although Fitzrapp had hinted as openly as he dared that they could dispense with her presence, she had sat through the business session, youthfully thrilled at the thought of a race between these two men. She had found herself comparing them as they sat on either side of the desk at which the major was drawing up an agreement for the contest, and she decided that they would be well

matched for a race of another sort had it not been for the handicap of suspicion under which the stranger labored.

The business ended, she had been rather pleased at the way in which he declined her uncle's invitation to have supper with them. His excuse had been that ranch duties called him, but she had gained and retained the impression that the refusal was but the outcropping of a well-bred instinct not to dine at their table while he was under the slightest suspicion.

In the succeeding weeks she had twice met him on the open range and exchanged a few words with him, but on neither occasion had the situation held anything to lend weight to Fitzrapp's continuing suspicion that he was the real leader of the rustlers. For that reason she had said nothing about the meetings on returning to the home ranch. She was quite sure that she was "the master of her soul," accountable to no man and equally convinced that she would be very certain of her own heart and mind before she permitted any change in the state of widowed blessedness.

One of these range meetings with the ranchman of mystery had possessed an angle which disturbed her in spite of herself. In her hard riding for exercise and relief from ranch monotony, she had passed

228 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

the boundaries of her own range onto that of Sam Gallegher. Emerging from a coulee she had come suddenly upon Childress, and riding with him was Flame of Fire Weed. Their stirrups brushed and they were in close converse. Had there been suitable cover at hand she would have taken refuge and permitted them to pass. As there was no chance of getting out of sight, she had ridden up and made the best of it. And she had rather admired that girl of Gallegher's that day. Flame, she decided, was fast budding into the fullness of her womanhood, and would soon be able to hold her own in any company. The way she had kept their brief trail-side conversation angling around the fact that her "dad" had heard from the commissioner of the Royal Mounted and that an inspector on special detail would soon be at work on their troubles had been really a masterpiece of self-possession and social tact.

Only a week before had occurred the momentous incident of her second visit to the Open A. One of her women friends from Strathconna was paying her a visit, and they had started out in the buckboard for a long prairie drive. They were discussing where they should go when Childress and his one-section ranch had come to mind. Her story regarding him had been sufficiently tinted with ro-

mance to excite the curiosity of her visitor, so that the heads of the gray team had been turned toward the basin. Fancifully, they had pretended that they were members of a posse running down a band of desperate horse thieves, and they had worked themselves into quite a gay mood by the time they sighted his cabin.

Childress was so frankly glad to see them, and so insistent that they should accept his hospitality to the extent of an improvised luncheon, that they had left the buckboard and spent a merry hour over a meal which he served on the top of an empty packing box in the shadow of the cabin's overhang. A can-opener was responsible for most of the menu, but two large rainbow trout, caught that very morning in the near-by stream, served as a delicious *piece de resistance*. The widow's guest had been quite captivated, and repeatedly declared on the drive back to the Rafter Ranch that she could never believe him a horse thief. Indeed, Ethel herself had reached the decision that she should require absolutely convincing proof of his guilt before believing.

Just now something in the distance caught the widow's restless eye. Arising, she went to the porch edge and shaded her face against the sun,

230 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

which was sinking, very red, behind the distant Rockies.

"Dust showing down the valley," she reported. "We'll know how they fared before very long."

Stepping into the house, she returned in a moment with a pair of field glasses.

"How many riders?" demanded her uncle. "How many riders?" he repeated querulously, before she was able to give him an answer.

"Only two."

"That means no prisoners," grumbled the pioneer.

"But——" The significant look of her flashing eyes made it unnecessary to complete the sentence which would not have become her tender lips.

"Yes, possibly they've killed them," he agreed. "Possibly. But I doubt it. Men don't seem to have the nerve to shoot to kill out on the range these days."

It was half an hour before Fitzrapp and the queerly named buster rode into the yard. The two on the porch waited with such patience as they could command while saddles and bridles were stripped off and the soaking wet blankets hung on the fence of the stable corral to dry. Any departure from this program of horse comfort first would have been an unheard of violation of ranch tradition.

Presently the arrivals approached the house. Their expressions told the story, and a single glance was sufficient for the reading. The Rafter A had been despoiled again. It only remained to learn the extent of the loss and the details of the raiders' escape.

"It's bad business, little woman," said Fitzrapp, who looked well-nigh exhausted, sinking into one of the rockers.

Season's Greetings—which undoubtedly was not his real name but the one he had brought with him to the ranch on a Christmas Eve arrival, and the only one to which he ever answered—deposited his lean, undersized frame upon the steps and leaned back against one of the rough, unturned pillars supporting the porch. His plain features were marred by a bristly, undecorative mustache. He had one useless eye that stared straight ahead, while the other, by which he saw, shifted uncertainly. The widow had spoken advisedly in saying that he looked capable of most any atrocity. Fortunately for him he remained in a country where personal appearance counts for very little.

"How deep did they gouge us?" asked the widow, anxious to know the worst.

"Without having stopped for an actual count,

I'd say in the neighborhood of seventy-five head," returned Fitzrapp despondently.

"They were fine stock, too. The rustlers got away clean?" The query was sharply put.

"We were up against a quintette of wicked fighters, Ethel. They nearly got us and we hadn't a chance against them."

He tossed his flat-brimmed felt hat to the widow. Through the peaked crown of it a rifle bullet had bored a hole.

"If that had been an inch lower——" he began again, looking up at her as though hoping to enlist her interest. But the widow, with a far-away look in her eyes, was gazing out over the valley.

"'Most nigh got me, too," added Greetings, pointing to a bullet mark in the sleeve of his coat near the shoulder. "I felt that there bird flit past. You can brand me for a slick-ear if it wa'n't plumb discouraging."

The major demanded the whole story, and Fitzrapp nodded to his companion, who looked none too pleased at what he would have termed "passing the buck."

"'Mornin' before yesterday all was lovely on the lower range," he began, after a preliminary clearing of his throat, an operation that by no means strengthened his weak voice. "We looks the band

over and decides that the thunder an' lightnin' of Monday night had caused some strayin'. So we ambles up Crooked Coulee and back through Feather Bed Meadow, roundin' up a couple of dozen.

"We unlimbers at Breakfast Flat," Greetings continued, "and munches a bit of grub, when up comes young Scar Face with word that the damned rustlers are repeatin' on the lower end of the herd. Mr. Fitzrapp and me climbs into the saddle and sets out hotfoot after 'em and meets the two bucks we'd left ridin' herd a-breezin' away from it as if they had pressin' and important business affairs elsewhere. They'd been told to vamoose, they says, by five angry-lookin' whites, and as the said whites had the drop on 'em, they hadn't hesitated any to do no argument."

Greetings paused for a moment to roll one, took a couple of puffs, and then resumed: "By the time we dusts over the divide and get a bird's-eye view of said situation, the blotters had cut out what hawses they wants and were driftin' them, comfortable-like, toward the ford. When they see us real he-men a-comin', two of 'em drops back as if to have a conversation party, and t'other three speeds up the cut-outs. The rear guard opens quite prompt before Fitzrapp and I knows we're within

234 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

range, and the duet them rifle bullets sung wasn't like the music of weddin' bells by a darned sight, was it boss?"

"But didn't you return their fire?" demanded MacDonald impatiently.

"Sure we returns their fire!" replied Greetings indignantly. "But much good that done us. They must 'a' had some new-fangled sort of irons—long range cannon. They makes the dust fly all around us, but we couldn't seem to make no impression in their neighborhood. We tries to go closer, and they takes to shootin' as if we was targets. Some shootin' it was, too, bet your life!" His comprehensive gesture took in Fitzrapp's holed sombrero and his own perforated coat sleeve. "We follows them clean into the night and plumb up to the line. But to get to the short of it, when daylight comes, there wasn't a sign of the murderin' devils or of the herd."

"Did the silver stallion show this time?" asked the widow, her manner noncommittal.

"They left the white beast behind this time," said Fitzrapp, a shade of impatience in his voice. "Probably he was tired out from activities elsewhere. But his master wasn't."

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I'm sure I recognized Childress as one of the two who covered the flight."

Ethel Address stared at him in amazement. "You were close enough to a horse thief to recognize him, and you let him get away?"

"Of course not close enough to see his face, but his general appearance in the saddle, and—Ethel, it seems to me pretty hard hearted of you to be so careless of my life after all I've been through. Is the herd more to you than——"

But the high-tempered young widow had not heard his plea. The sounding of a door sharply closed interrupted him.

The two who had returned from the fray looked at each other. "In the hero market, us two would sell pretty cheap, if the widow was the only bidder," remarked Greetings, with a grin that did not make him any more seemly. "She don't think we're anything because we ain't corpses."

"You might have been more thrilling in detailing the encounter," complained Fitzrapp.

"Never was no good nohow a-gildin' of lilies," remarked the breed, unlimbering himself from the steps and crawfishing in the direction of the bunk house.

CHAPTER XIX.

SURPRISES FOR FLAME.

DUSK was just about to crash into night, as it has a habit of doing on the Canadian plains until summer comes along with its near-midnight daylight, when Flame Gallagher loped up to the small lake that lay in front of the straggly Lazy G establishment. Since sun-up she had been in the saddle, riding hard on the cattle that wore her personal brand, shooting a few coyotes that she found looking for "doggies," helping a cow or two that needed aid in the throes of range motherhood, enjoying the vigorous air, and wondering a lot about what might be going on to the eastward—on the Open A, where the attractive mystery man had settled down with his queer Irish helper, and on the Rafter A where the difficult widow held court.

She was tired, was Bernice, although the flame of her would not admit it. Her horse was tired, a fact that needed no admission, for its rider knew. She guided him into the lake at a point where the gravelly bottom shelved gently and, with her puttee-clad legs draped around the saddle horn, waited

until thirst had been slaked. Then she headed to the stable for a hurried unsaddling, realizing from the sounds that came from the cook-shack that she was late for supper and need expect no help.

The first surprise came to Flame when she led her unleathered mount into the barn. There, in one of the comfortable box-stalls reserved for the prize horses of the Lazy G, stood Silver, munching his rations of oats as contentedly as though he belonged.

"What the—what the hell!" she exclaimed, right out loud and regardless.

Silver did not trouble to respond, even if his equine brain held any remembrance of her.

In silence she went about the task of bedding down and feeding her horse; the while her mind was busy. What could have happened to bring John Childress' prize stallion under their roof, not just for a meal, but all tucked in for the night? Was the beautiful beast's master—the elusive, attractive, enigmatic unknown—a guest at the house? Or was it possible that the cogs had slipped, affording a show-down and a capture which left him a prisoner? Not yet was she ready to doubt the man who was more or less under general suspicion; but she did hurry with her chores that she might the sooner get to her place at the oil-cloth covered table

238 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

where the Galleghers, father and daughter, regularly ate with the men of the outfit.

She entered the long, unfinished room with her usual greeting when she arrived late for the evening meal, the nearest to a formal occasion which the Lazy G Ranch could boast.

"Cheerio!" she cried, and spun her light sombrero to an empty prong on the elk's head that served as hatrack.

"You're late to-night, Firecracker," remarked her father, above the softer-spoken greetings of the several punchers.

"Small matter, if you've left me anything to eat," she countered cheerfully. "I'm hungry as a li'l old brown bear what's just got through a winter's nursing his paw. How about it, Chan Toy, you biscuit-mixing son of a mandarin?" She was the only member of the outfit who ever dared to joke the Chinese who, as cook, swayed no mean sceptre over their ever-hearty appetites.

"If you no like what am left," returned the Chinese with unsmiling countenance, "you know what you can do, Missie Fireworks."

"And what can I do, you heathen Chinees?" she demanded with mock severity.

"You smile and make a face up. Then Chan Toy cook you a beeve-steak special."

"That's the yellow boy," she cheered him, as she pulled back her regular chair and sat down at the table to the right of her father who held the owner's place of honor at the head of the oblong board. "You cook me a beeve-steak special, with mushrooms and bamboo sprouts."

"From a can, the mushrooms," he advised her, and waddled off toward the kitchen which was divided from the dining-room by a partition that ran halfway to the unceiled roof.

Already she had scanned the faces about the oil-cloth; all were familiar—regulars. If Jack—Jack Childress had been to the ranch since her departure that morning, either he had not stayed for supper or was under restraint somewhere about the home ranch. She was anxious, yet she scorned to ask questions. Covertly she studied the expression of "Smiling Dick" Murdock who, at his usual table place, had finished his meal and was smoking, his chair tilted back. "Scowling Dick" would have been a better name for him this evening. From the thunder cloud of his expression, she deduced that nothing serious had happened to their mysterious neighbor. Yet any reassurance gained from that source did not help her in solving the mystery in silver hair that the stable sheltered. She'd have to wait until meal's end and the nightly confab with

her lonely parent, unless she wished to lay herself open to a show of interest that would have been inadvisable.

What little sense men had anyhow! Her father must have realized that she had seen the strange horse in the barn and he should have known that she was consumed with curiosity. But men would be men. She must wait or expose the hand that would show her interest in the owner of Open A.

The steak came shortly, broiled to that happy turn between medium and rare, and garnished to a degree that even Owner Sam could not have commanded from the Celestial chef. Nothing much was said while Flame ate, for all knew what that border air did to appetites. And the girl, her mind quite absorbed as to what and why for the silver stallion, kept knife and fork busy, occasionally dropping both implements to run fingers through her wondrous hair.

Not until she had pushed back her plate and refused the "slab" of pie offered by Chan Toy—on the ground that she had some respect for her girlish figure—did Dick Murdock speak to her directly.

"It's been a hard day for all of us, Flame," he began, banishing the frown, and replacing it with

the nearest he knew to a look of adoration. "Can't we have a bit of close harmony on just one or two of the old songs. Start it off, pal!"

Flame looked at her father. He was comfortably sprawled in his big chair at the head of the table, his meal-time cigar half smoked, his entire manner one of content. Nothing alarming or even startling could she see in his attitude. This seemed to be just like a hundred other evenings after a hard day's work on the range. Yet there was the silver stallion box-stalled in the Lazy G stables! What did it mean? Was the outfit by prearrangement trying to lull her to a sense of security about this man she wanted to doubt, but could not—this stranger who seemed to be playing the only other woman on the Fire Weed range? Entirely possible. But she would not weaken, even to ask questions.

"I'm pretty tired, boys," she said, after an appealing look at her father, which that worthy chose to ignore. "But a little harmony, not too close, might rest all of us. Shall it be, 'Bringing In the Sheaves' or 'What Shall the Harvest Be?'?"

"Rustlers," murmured Rust, from his place at the far end of the table, evidently in answer to the interrogation of the last song title.

"What did you say?" The snapped question came from Sam Gallegher, and his entry evidently was most unexpected.

"Nawthin' that amounts to anything," murmured the reddish puncher, and he slumped back in his chair, pretending an interest in the bottom layer of a pie crust that he previously had scorned.

Flame straightened in her chair. They were holding out on her, the whole bunch of them, including her father. They had his prize horse in the stable and they had him somewhere about, and they were afraid to tell her! Of all that she was convinced. She realized that she had just a moment in which to decide, and in that moment she decided to play them at their own game.

"Let's have 'The Cowboy's Dream,' Firecracker," put in her father. "We all get in strong on the chorus of that old-timer."

Flame pushed back her chair, but did not rise, for there was no formality about the Lazy G's after-supper "sing." Flinging one khaki-covered knee over the other she began in a contralto as clear as a day in June:

"Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by and by."

And then the outfit, with bass, tenor and unidentified squalls, swung into the decidedly repetitious chorus:

“Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little doggies, roll on, roll on.
Roll on, roll on:
Roll on, little doggies, roll on.”

As though she thought they needed the instruction she came right back at them with the dogmatic lines of a second verse, in which a dim narrow trail leads to the bright, happy region; but a broad one to perdition was “posted and blazed all the way.” She sang, between their lusty roll-ons, of the “great round-up,” where cowboys, like doggies, were gathered to be marked by the Riders of Judgment, and on to the final warning:

“They say He will never forget you,
That He knows every action and look;
So, for safety you’d better get branded,
Have your name in the great Tally Book.”

Several other ranch songs followed, but somehow the usual zest of their not unusual chorus exercise was lacking. She halted them for false harmony on “Poor Lonesome Cowboy” and when they began to twit Dick Murdock for his scowl and his refusal to sing, she gave them “The Dreary, Dreary

244 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Life" which generally marked the end of the chuck-room concert. This well known range lament, calculated to bring tears to the strongest eyes, ran:

"A cowboy's life is a dreary, dreary life,
Some say it's free from care;
Rounding up the cattle from morning till night
In the middle of the prairie so bare."

After complaining of "the wolves and owls with their terrifying howls" the cowboy of the song envies the farmer and the man who stays home with wife and child. And the last "yowl" gives all the glad part to the cook, thus:

"Half-past-four the noisy cook will roar,
'Hurrah, boys, she's breakin' day!'
Slowly we will rise and wipe our sleepy eyes
The sweet, dreamy night passed away."

Flame suited action to the word of the song, pushing back her chair and rising to a pair of tired feet. "It's the sweet dreamy for me, boys," she said. "Come on, dad."

Although Smiling Dick Murdock concentrated his gaze upon her, the girl spared him no look. Not so easily was he to get back into favor after such an attack as he had made upon Jack Childress, that different sort of man.

No word passed during the brief walk from the

chuck-house to the owner's cabin. The father, having missed none of the wordless tilt between his daughter and the handsome range boss, was wondering what it was all about.

"Out roaming the range this afternoon, Firecracker, you missed a caller," said Gallagher when they had settled on either side of the reading lamp in the plain but comfortably-furnished living-room. "Serves you right."

"I knew I'd missed something while stabling my beastie," returned the girl. "But it will be news if you tell me what you did to our neighbor that he should leave the pride of his heart, Mr. Silver, stabled with us. I hope there wasn't any rough stuff?"

"Rough stuff? Over what?"

"You know as well as I do the cloud of rustling suspicion that hangs over him. This outfit's not inclined to be pulling on silk gloves where he's concerned. Again let me say that I hope there was no rough treatment."

The father smiled tolerantly. "If I'd known you were so deeply interested, girl o' mine, I'd have kept him by hook or crook or invitation to dinner until you loped in. He rode over with a led saddler, and asked us to keep his silver horse while he's away on some particular business the exact

nature of which was left to our imagination. Said his one man, an Irishman named Mahaffy, I believe, would have all he could do looking after the stock—his breeding band—and he did not want to risk Silver while he was gone. I could not refuse such a neighborly request, and I didn't ask any questions. There are times when I don't like to answer. You can have the thrill of exercising the beauty beast if you like."

"He's going away—where?" The girl scarcely realized that she had put a question. She flushed with embarrassment when her father laughed at her.

"Seems to me that some one is strangely interested in one rustler suspect," he commented unfeelingly. "What's friend Dick Murdock going to think and say. I can tell you, though, where the attractive neighbor is going—at least where he said he was going. He has some important business to transact down in Montana."

The girl said no more, but busied herself with a bulky catalogue just received from Eaton's, the Winnipeg department store, a volume that has been called "the next-to-Bible of the West Canada housewife." She made out a sizable order, tossed it across the table for her father's approval, and decided she was tired enough to "dint the feathers."

Flame took refuge of her own room, the size of which was such that it served as bedroom, boudoir and shower-bath—this last an unusual ranch luxury, thanks to the immediate presence of the lake and a windmill which, aided by a lofty tank attachment, gave the entire home ranch a considerable and unfailing water pressure. Hers was a dainty room, done in white and hung with blue draperies. At once it was characteristic and yet it wasn't. Had one seen the young mistress only in saddle clothes, which were waist, breeches and boots, with no compromise of skirt, this blue-and-white—almost Dresden—effect must have seemed somewhat incongruous. But the room was sacred to Flame, the only woman on the ranch. None ever entered it except the China-boy who "made it up and down," as he put it. There, in the mirror of her dresser, she scowled at the freckles that persisted to bridge her nose, but as always decided not to amputate them. Had a pimple appeared—— But fair as was Flame's skin there never had been a prairie draft so hot as to burn her.

This night she put on the flimsiest of the things she had learned to wear in her few years at a Montreal convent—the few years of an education cut short by the death of her mother and a feeling that Dad-Sam would "go wild" did she not return

and take care of him. Before she tucked herself in under the silken blue spread that concealed a couple of blankets—provincial nights are cold at this early season—she studied herself in the glass and was not ashamed to preen a trifle. What would he think of her could he see her now and in so different a costume than the rough range ones in which she most often had greeted him? What would he think? And why—why was she worried, or even interested, over what he'd think, if, indeed, he'd think at all?

With the windows particularly open to-night, that she might hear and get into the fray should any attack be made upon the silver horse of suspicion, she pulled the brocaded coverlet up to her chin, and repeated words to herself.

"You fool go to sleep!"

That was the order repeated over and over, at first verbally, then in thought. "Go to sleep—you're tired! Go to sleep!" But for once the order was not obeyed.

Flame found herself pondering over what might be this mission in Montana from which he might not speedily return. There was something weirdly strange about his leaving Silver with another ranch outfit. Suppose that a raid on their stock took place while he was absent from his "baby" ranch in the

basin, presumably on business in Montana? Was not that State the base from which the rustlers worked; the haven to which they drove their loot for brand blotting and hurried sales farther south? Would she, then, still be able to cling to her persistent belief that Childress was a gentleman and not the scoundrel that so many believed him? This last question she did not answer, except to breathe a fervent hope that there would be no raid.

Then she slipped from her bed, put pink toes into purple "mules," walked to her dressing-table and, for the first time in more than a year, set a small alarm-clock. Usually she could waken at any hour on which she set her mind; but to-night her mind did not seem to be entirely under control. And there was something she must know—something that meant getting up with the Chink cook and riding hard until she knew. Her father had been too courteous to ask questions, but she need not be. The newcomer called her Flame and she called him Jack when they were alone.

Why was Jack going down into Montana on an inferior mount, his own prize left to the care of a man he scarcely knew? Why? But particularly *why*—*why was she* losing sleep over the fact?

CHAPTER XX.

POOR BRANDED MAN!

FLAME's clock did not fail her. Next morning she was up with the cook who, at that season of the year, was not perpetrating any of the half-past-four roars. She slipped out of silken "nighterie" and into the rougher clothes of the range. Without disturbing her father in his quarters across the living-room, she crossed the quadrangle and entered the chuck-shack to the unblinking surprise of Chan.

"Coffee and cakes, Chan," she ordered with a grin as cheerful as though she had slept the clock around instead of only a quarter of it. "And you needn't say that I had so early a breakfast should any one ask for figures."

"Cheerio—I mean righteo," returned the Chinaman. To him these white ranch people were a queer lot, but Gallegher a good boss, and the young lady less troublesome than the housewives for whom he had worked in several towns. "Chan keep sleclet much better 'an Mister Murdock."

She gave him a quick look, followed by sharp demand: "Just exactly what do you mean by that, you heathen."

Chan grinned broadly, as he always did when she called him "heathen." She had been the object of his most respectful worship from the time of a near tragedy of the winter before. The cook had returned from a vacation in Strathconna, which boasted a considerable Chinatown. There he had acquired a new idol or joss, a dreadful-looking dragon figure, which he enshrined upon a shelf in the dining compartment of the chuck-house. Rusty, the buster, came in for supper, saw the new decoration and proceeded to ring it with his sombrero instead of using the regular hat-and-gun rack. At the very moment the Stetson settled over the emblem of Buddhism, Chan appeared in the doorway of the kitchen partition, in hand the carving knife with which he was about to slice roast beef. He saw the desecration, and seeing, saw red. With a yell that would have done credit to the most supernatural banshee, he started after the bow-legged horseman, brandishing the knife in religious frenzy. When almost within reach of the thoroughly frightened Rust, who had entered upon a life-or-death marathon around the long table, not daring to pause to open the door for the refuge of the yard, Flame had entered. Taking in the tense situation at a glance, she tripped the knife-man for a heavy fall.

After forcing Rust to remove his hat from the

Celestial's sacred object, and insisting that he apologize to the cook, she had convinced Chan that her ready tripping probably had saved his life. The outfit undoubtedly would have "eaten him alive" had the carving knife reached its mark. Thereafter Chan swore by her, and for her, but never at her.

"Murdock, he clazy about Missie Flame—so much clazy he can kepp that sleclet away from nobody but she—you."

"Well," she returned after a moment of pondering on the Chink's sage observation, "you'll keep my early departure this morning a 'sleclet' from all hands or I'll—I'll feed you to the buzzards!"

Still grinning, Chan went about the cooking of a hurried breakfast, sorry that there were so few culinary touches that might be added to an early morning meal that was calculated particularly to "stick to the ribs."

Breakfast finished, she leathered her own particular black; paused a moment to stroke the cold muzzle of Silver, the strange visitor; then she mounted and was off in an easterly direction at a pace calculated for long distance travel. She congratulated herself that she was up and away before any of the outfit was stirring. Even on ordinary occasions she was adverse to answering questions about her proposed movements, but never had been

able to persuade her father and the older busters of the fact; moreover, this was no ordinary occasion. *

To herself, Flame did not apologize for the unwonted interest she was taking in the affairs of a comparative stranger. No more did she try to explain this interest. The fact that it came from the heart, not the brain, did not alarm her. There had been so little heart interest in her life thus far that she found a sort of thrill toying with this one.

Her chief concern, as her horse brushed through the fire weed and over the stretches of rising grass, was whether or not she could pick the pass he would take on his ride into Montana and, picking it, would she arrive before he had gone through. Admittedly she was worried about what had happened on or about the home ranch. Childress' leaving of the silver stallion was a queer proceeding at least. She did not doubt her father's statement that their big neighbor had brought the horse over and ridden away toward his one-section ranch on a led animal. But the general demeanor of the boys, particularly of Smiling Dick Murdock, had alarmed her as to what might have happened when Childress had rounded the lake and ridden beyond the vision range of Sam Gallegher. It was more to satisfy herself on this point than to attempt to pry

into the big ranchman's affairs that had led her afield so early.

And if she were lucky enough to encounter him jogging southward into the State of Trouble, what should she say to him, what ask, how explain her early-morning presence so far from home? With the thrill of a school girl engaged on some momentous undertaking in behalf of love's young dream, she asked herself, answered herself—then discarded her answers.

In case Jack—Mr. Childress proved entirely unmolested, in good health and in his right mind, riding about his own private business, Flame realized she would need to take care lest she make herself and her impulsive action seem ridiculous. That would be simply insupportable! He might think of her worse than the situation really warranted—that she was in love with him; when, of course, she was but “mildly interested.” Yes, she would need to take care, unless—and she almost hoped that something in the way of mild discipline had been administered. What a chance that would give for her to show sisterly interest and sympathy!

Meantime her mount had been throwing the miles behind fleet heels. They had reached a point on the range where she must choose her pass for the “hold-up.” Would he take the narrow, rocky

one that gave way across "Medicine Line" directly south of his own place, or would he swing around to the valley farther east. She decided that all depended on where in the States he was headed. As she was totally without information on this point, she accepted the first chance that offered and eased her black down into a rocky defile that afforded a direct gateway to Crow's Nest, a settlement of ill-repute, as well as to law-abiding towns farther south.

Once on the trail she dismounted and examined it closely for traces of any recent passage. Two nights before there had been a downpour which washed clean the earthy portions of the road. She could see no hoof marks and was satisfied that none had passed in either direction since the rain. If the owner of the Open A intended to use that gap to the States, she was in time.

Around a sharp bend, she halted her horse in mid-trail, having thought of a subterfuge that might lessen his suspicion that she was laying in wait for him. Loosening the cinch on her cow-saddle, she waited with the patience of a feminine Job. And presently she was rewarded. The scrape of an iron shoe upon a rock came to her ears from beyond the pinnacle that hid her presence. At once she busied herself with the saddle straps, and

256 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

so Jack Childress found her, engaged in a commonplace operation of the trail.

Flame did not look up until he was almost upon her, and then with well feigned surprise. This changed quickly to real anxiety when she saw the peep of a white bandage beneath the brim of his hat. She took full advantage of the moment afforded her for speculation. Something, then, had happened to him the day before—some injury that required the use of a gauze dressing! Noting the position of the injury, she recalled that other morning when she had discovered Dick Murdock, Roper and Rust about to do a dreadful thing with a red hot running-iron. It required no great strain on her lively imagination to figure out what had happened.

Not for a second did she doubt her father. Samuel Gallagher never had lied to her, and she did not believe that he would begin in this twilight stage of their close acquaintance. This thing that had been done to Childress had been perpetrated after he had deposited the silver stallion and started back to his own little ranch. For just a second she was disappointed in him that he should have permitted a second attack to succeed. A man as upstanding as he seemed to be should not have been caught napping twice, should at least have

left his mark upon the enemy. She had seen no trace of conflict upon any of the outfit about the home-ranch board the night before. They must have sprung some new-fangled surprise upon him. She could not bring herself to believe that Jack—*her* Jack as she whispered to herself—was a man afraid to fight. Should he prove to be that sort, of course, her interest must end; but he would not! She knew he would not.

By this time he was upon her, pulling his mount to a halt in a state of surprise, the genuineness of which could not be doubted.

"Our trails do cross, Flame of Fire Weed!" he exclaimed gladly. "Although yesterday, when I did not find you in your own corral, I feared my luck was slipping."

He had pulled off his hat, in utter disregard of the bandage about his forehead.

"What—what has happened to you, Jack Childress?" she cried, sweeping a hand in gesture across her own fair forehead.

"Nothing worth worrying about," he assured her. "Are you going far and headed my way? Can I help you with that saddle?"

She stamped her foot. "I'll not be put off with polite chatter. Those roughnecks that dad calls an outfit got you and branded you after you'd left

258 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Silver with us as a hostage of your good behavior. Dick Murdock, the smiling fiend, will answer to me for every inch of the burn. Does it hurt terribly and have you done everything possible for the wound?"

Childress grinned reassuringly, pleased beyond measure at her snap-of-the-hammer sympathy. "I've done everything possible," he said. "The wound don't hurt. Probably there will be no permanent scar. But above all else, let me absolve Murdock and his men. They had nothing to do with this. I did not see any of them yesterday. I doubt if they knew I had been to the ranch until they found Silver in your home stable."

"Then it must have been that shifty widow's outfit that got you," she flared, after a long inquiring look that convinced her he was not absolving his enemies who rode the Gallegher brand just to save her trouble. "You'll have to spin an iron-clad excuse, Jack, before I'll forgive you for letting any of that Rafter bunch catch you napping." She paused a moment—a pause he did not interrupt, being entirely too busy identifying the emotions that played across her face. "Strange," she went on, more to herself than to him, "strange they should hit on the same ordeal that our busters had. That Tom Fitzrapp must have been talking to

Murdock. Will you climb down off that horse, brother, and let a woman have a look at what has happened? Men are worse than babies when it comes to looking after their wounds."

Sergt. Childress obeyed, already convinced that in the end he would make a clean breast of exactly what had happened.

"Be careful," he admonished as she started to unwind the bandage.

She frowned at him. "You're worse than a child with a cut finger," she chided. "I'm not going to hurt you, son."

"I meant be careful with the bandage—it's all I've got with me."

"I'll take care of that," she assured him and went on removing clumsily fixed pins, each of which she saved in the sleeve of her shirt, as though in a pincushion.

At last the bandage was off and she stood back to observe the havoc wrought his brow. She stared a moment; then transferred her gaze to the bandage.

"Didn't you have any salve—any ointment?" she demanded.

"Would that have been good for—for what ails me?" he answered with a cheerful question of his

own. "Does the horseshoe effect meet with your artistic approval?"

Obviously she was puzzled. Who wouldn't have been? The idea of jesting over as deep a disgrace as can come to a man on the range—a living degradation than which many would have preferred a merciful death!

"What's the idea, Jack?" she demanded after a moment. "For a poor branded man you don't seem as concerned as might be, and if I was going to put the horse thief brand on any misguided freebooter, I'd burn deeper than your decorator seems to have done. I don't get this smear any more than I do your attitude toward it. Suppose you come across clean."

"Sorry, Flame, that you don't like my artistry with the brush," he laughed. "I hadn't time to ride over to the Rafter A and show it to our dashing widow friend."

Shy as a beautiful, speckled trout, she refused to take the bait of Ethel Andress' mention; but she was quick to demand further information regarding the brand.

"*Your* artistry, what do you mean? And what had a brush to do with it?"

"Recall, if you please, that day not so terribly long ago when you arrived in the nick o' time to

save a certain roped ranchman from the decorative efforts of Messrs. Rust and Roper, doubtless members of the impressionistic school and deep burners with the running-iron."

The girl nodded actively and the sergeant went on, changing to the personal form.

"Perhaps you don't remember that I said as we were riding to your home ranch something about a valuable idea that had come to me from the frustrated attempt. This masterpiece of forehead decoration is the working out of that idea. I sent to Strathconna for a tube of blister paste and a brush with which to lay it on. I worked hard to paint an artistic horseshoe and if the effect isn't what it should be, blame the zig-zag crack which Paddy Mahaffy put in my only mirror when he dropped it the other day—seven years' bad luck to him! I didn't put any brand within the shoe, as it is not necessary that the folks I'm going to visit should know exactly where I acquired the mark of the thief. It will be enough that they should think me what I am not—a rustler of horses."

"Then you're going down into Montana on a visit?" she asked, more to gain time in which to ponder the madness of a man who, without compulsion of any sort, would so disfigure himself.

262 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

There ensued momentary digression, for he asked her to oblige him by replacing the bandage. He wanted the blistered horseshoe to become well set, and he did not care to exhibit it until he reached his destination.

"This visit?" she reminded him, when she had performed a first-aid effect that would have been a credit to an army nurse.

"I haven't lost any animals yet from this popular out-door sport of rustling in Fire Weed," he returned readily. "But then I haven't many and I haven't been here long. I am tired, though, of the suspicion that hangs over me and my silver horse. I owe at least one of the gang a toasting for that day he marooned me on that ledge and forced me to chin myself out of difficulty on the wriggliest length of hemlock I ever hope to tie to. Moreover, we see nothing of that scarlet patrol that we asked of the Commissioner of the Royal Mounted. Something must be done, and without any fuss, I'm going to attempt to do it."

Sergeant Jack was sorry as soon as he had spoken that he had mentioned the Mounties. That was his one slip into direct prevarication, and it did not come easy from him to lie to Flame of Fire Weed. He tried to excuse himself to himself by the fact that he had used the uniform color scheme in his

statement, but realized the evasive poverty of such an excuse. As long as he confessed so much of his plans, why didn't he go the whole way and tell her that Mahaffy and he were the scarlet patrol—very much without the scarlet? He had trusted her with much, trusting without exacting even a nod of promise that she would not reveal his plan; then why not tell her everything? But something tied his tongue on the big secret. He was not sure just what this was, but argued mentally that there would be time enough for disclosures when he had accomplished something on this special detail.

Flame had listened to his revelation with widening lids. These now narrowed as she weighed the proposition.

"Then you're going——"

"To Crow's Nest first, possibly farther into Montana—wherever the trail leads."

"Don't go to Crow's Nest," she begged. "They'll kill you!"

"They're more likely to enfold me like a brother." He raised a hand in mock salute to the forehead bandage.

"It's the hell-hole of the West," Flame continued to voice objection. "I wouldn't send my worst enemy into it. What are a few stolen horses and lifted hides to——"

264 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

He was pleased beyond measure at her interest, the thought of which would ride with him no matter what the danger. But he realized that the morning was slipping away. An after-dark entry into the Nest for a stranger was a foolhardy undertaking. Pleasant as it was to tarry here on the safe side of "Medicine Line," studying emotions as portrayed on what was becoming to him the fairest face he had ever seen, regardless of freckles and flare of hair, Childress realized that he must ride on.

"Nothing's likely to happen to a branded man," he reassured her. "By night my forehead will wear what seems to the casual observer to be a real scar."

"But the Crow's Nest!" she cried. "I wish you weren't going into that brimming cup of iniquity alone. Suppose we ride back to the ranch and tell your plan to dad. He'll send Murdock or one of our trusty busters to back you up."

Childress grinned. "My dear——" He caught his breath at the daring phrase of endearment which had popped out so unexpectedly; but she seemed not to have noticed. "Flame, I wouldn't ride into hell brushing stirrups with Murdock. If you'll let me adjust that saddle for you—fix what-

ever's wrong with the leather, I'll be on the way along the primrose path."

"There's nothing wrong with the saddle, Jack." Her turn for confession had come and she met it gallantly—without a blush. "I slipped a cinch just to have an excuse for laying in wait for you, hoping you'd come this way."

Almost at this moment did he tell her something that he was beginning to feel sure eventually and inevitably would be told; but he held his tongue.

"You guessed the right pass," he parried the danger point. "Take good care of Silver, won't you, Flame?" He swung into the saddle and cantered down into the draw where soon he would leave the land of the beaver for that of the eagle.

"Crow's Nest," Flame murmured almost in a wail. "Crow's Nest! Why did he wish such a task on himself?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NEST OF THE CROW.

IN the heart of the bad lands, where the Bitter Root Mountain range begins, lies the nest of the crow, one of the few remaining hide-outs which the taming West affords. It is easy of access once you know the trail whether you come from the prosperous Montana towns to the south or from the Canadian province to the north. And it is safe enough to all who have won their spurs at outlawry in either direction. A single road leads to it; although there are several trails away from it, available to those who are "in the know" and forced to make a sudden get-away.

At the entrance gulch, through which the only wagon road winds its way into the dreary upland, so well called "bad," there dwells a small rancher who finds it worth while to keep within the law. His chief source of income, on which he pays no tax, is to signal the approach of strangers, particularly officers of the State or Federal government. A flag which he can raise or lower without leaving his front porch sends the alarm to the out-

law nest. The system may be old-fashioned, but it has not yet been discarded either for the telephone or the radio. Telephone wires can be cut by a posse that really is in earnest about paying the Nest a surprise visit and radio communication is, as yet, too much of a mystery to interest these border folk as a safeguard.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when Sergeant Jack rode up to the out-guard ranch house. From his previous visit to Montana he had learned enough about Crow's Nest to understand the method of safe approach. The bandage had disappeared from his forehead; written there in lines of fire was the horseshoe brand of disgrace.

Lounging, as was his wont, in a sway-backed chair built by stretching an undressed hide upon a proper arrangement of saplings, loafed the out-guard—a long-nosed, lanky, unshaven mountaineer. At his feet, in half slumber, lay a couple of nondescript hounds, reputed to be efficient guardians, so far as alarm was concerned, of the entrance gulch at night. In the scraggly front yard a boy of nine or ten years was playing as best he might with no mate to make up a real game. In the open door of the shack a slovenly woman appeared, evidently the wife and mother, drawn from some

268 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

household task by the noise of the horse's approach.

"Greetings and salutations, friend," was the sergeant's opening. "Is everything sitting pretty up at the Nest?" His hat was tilted low over his forehead, concealing the informative scar.

"That there all depends on who yuh are and what yuh want," returned the man on the porch without moving a muscle of his elongated frame. "I'm Doc Chase, ranchman and honest. I don't pay no attention what goes on up there. Who're yuh?"

Childress removed his Stetson, disclosing the tell-tale wound which already was beginning to look like a scar.

Chase started up in his chair, then sank back again, as though the effort was painful.

"They got yuh, eh?" he remarked. "Wonder they let yuh get away, Childress, with just a brand, considering the Strathconna Breeders has put an alive-or-dead on you."

"How did you know my name?" the sergeant demanded.

"Don't know your real name—only the one you've borrowed from somebody in the Mounted. Recognized yuh from the description on the bill

and the picture. What was the matter with your gun that yuh let 'em treat yuh like a maverick?"

"They got me when I wasn't looking and I guess they didn't know about the reward. You don't seem interested in collecting it."

Doc Chase sniffed loftily. "Blood money ain't no good to no one stranger. I reckon you'll be welcome up to the Nest. Tommie!" This last was called to the boy who came quickly from his play. "Tommie, run up the flag."

"The stripes or the white one?" asked the lad.

"The white, you young idiot. Can't yuh recognize a friend when yuh see one?"

So Childress rode on into the rough country, confident that no pot-shot would be taken at him from the abundant cover on either side of the trail. Had the stars and stripes fluttered from the signal mast on the hill behind Doc Chase's cabin, he probably would not have been allowed to cover the first of the two miles that intervened without being made a target. As the flag was white, he rode safely and unchallenged into the small mountain park which so surprisingly decorated the region of mountainous despoliation.

Years before Bart Crowe, a potential outlaw, had found refuge there, liked the semi-forested location, and had taken up a homestead. Once the

property was his and his debt to the law squared by the statute of limitations, he had built a log hotel and passed the word among his hard-riding, careless friends that at Crow's Nest was a sure refuge in the time of storm. The arrangement with Doc Chase had come later and was particularly designed against Prohibition raiders, since Montana sheriffs and their deputies preferred to wait until men they desired had left the "nest."

With the law's repression closing in on the better known and more respectable resorts of the state, Crowe's business had increased. A supply of liquor always available through his rum runners from the North, he had built up quite a trade with loggers from the camps in the Bitter Root forests. They could get in if they looked right to Doc Chase and stay until they had spent their earnings. If there was a tougher place in the United States than Crow's Nest—he had dropped the "e" of his own name for that of the glossy-black carrion birds which were at home among the cedars—Bart Crowe would have wondered "how come."

Before the main structure of the small settlement—a log building of considerable size—Childress dropped rein on his cayuse and entered. Beyond the open door he found a long bar, its wood unpolished and with no brass rail for impatient

feet, at which half a dozen men were drinking. Two wore the vividly-colored Mackinaws of lumberjacks and the calk studded boots that went with the same; two were in riding clothes of balloon-trouser cut; a fifth was dressed in the height of Helena fashion and the sixth he recognized from description as Bart Crowe himself. Behind the rough bar, a pasty youth with plastered hair was polishing glasses. The only difference between him and the bartenders of the pre-Volstead era was the fact that he wore a flannel shirt instead of a white jacket, but under the collar of that shirt blazed a crimson tie with a more-or-less diamond accompaniment.

No one paid particular attention to the newcomer, although seven covert glances certainly were directed his way. They had known that someone was coming, as reported by the flag. It was up to him to make the first overture.

Childress glanced at the group, as though seeking a familiar face, and he nodded to the man so easily recognized as the proprietor. He still wore his hat, pulled down over his eyes.

Then he crossed to as strange a bulletin board as ever an outlaw camp boasted. The freshest and most prominent "Wanted" placard held his entire attention, as it was the first time he had

272 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

seen it since he had ordered a few of them printed and privately and particularly distributed by his friend the sheriff of Bison County, Montana. Below a reasonably good likeness of himself appeared with the usual flare of the small-town printer:

\$1,000 REWARD

DEAD *or* ALIVE

This amount will be paid by the
undersigned for the capture in any
form of

JACK CHILDRESS

wanted for horse stealing. Has
taken name of Mounted Police
officer and may wear uniform.

And there followed a description that was more or less accurate.

Childress spent several minutes studying this poster; then he crossed to the bar.

"Pen and ink," he requested.

The bartender looked startled; the drinkers glanced up.

"Don't serve 'em usually; would you have 'em with or without?"

Childress started a long reach over the bar, which the drink-mixer avoided. Then, evidently,

he got a glance-of-eye order from Bart Crowe; set out a bottle of ink and a scratchy pen. "We don't cash no checks up here, mister," he asserted, not to be denied a last fling.

The sergeant took the bottle in one hand, the pen in the other and crossed to the board. There he traced a horseshoe on the brow of the half-tone presentment of himself. When he had finished and returned the pen and ink, he swept off his hat and addressed the group at the bar.

"Now, gents, that poster looks something like me," he said casually. "If anyone of you needs a thousand dollars reward——"

He waited. The others stared—stared most fixedly at the horseshoe scar upon his forehead, in that outlaw camp a royal badge.

"Be yourself, son!" The admonition came from Bart Crowe. "Step up and name your poison—one's as bad as the other."

"You don't mind the brand, then?" Childress demanded.

"Hell, no!" said Crowe.

With that the sergeant walked over to the bulletin board and pulled down the poster which he had arranged to have posted against himself. "That's a go," he said. "What'll you all have."

While they were having—mostly "another of

the same"—Childress stepped to the swinging door of the back room where a tin-piano and a "fiddle" were making music for some sort of a dance. Several women were there—best not described. They rented cabins from Crowe for a profession that is older than the oldest. The two-piece orchestra blared, and the two couples on the floor seemed to dance until one of the women, a brunette slightly beyond the life she obviously was leading, caught sight of the stranger in the doorway. At once she let go the big lumberjack who was trying to follow her through the steps of a waltz.

"Here's my man at last!" she cried and quit her rough-shod partner cold.

"Not me," said Childress, trying to back out.

But he was not quick enough. The woman insisted that he dance with her, insisted even to the point of laying violent hands upon him. The group at the bar saw the attack and applauded.

"Better give in afore you offend the lady," advised one of his newly made acquaintances—the one with the pegleg. "Delores Doleroso drives a wicked knife and gen'ally gits what she thinks she wants."

"Come on, you big, beautiful horse thief," urged Delores. "I just love to waltz with a man what's wanted dead-or-alive." She turned to the two-piece

"orchestra." "Start that number over!" she commanded.

None of them paid any particular attention to the Swede logger who had been ditched in the midst of a dance for which he already had paid. The mackinaw-clad giant stood mid-floor, rocking his huge frame backward and forward on the calks that studded the soles of his boots. The while he clawed at a blond-bushed chin, his sky-blue eyes shooting dangerous fires.

Although not in the least interested in the dark-eyed dance hall girl who had drafted him as partner, Childress could not be rough with a woman. Since she would not be shaken off gently, there seemed nothing to do but to dance with her. A skillful "stepper," despite infrequent indulgence, he swung her out upon the floor from which all but the deserted logger had retired.

From the Swede came a snarl. "You tank you can steal my girl—Sven Larsen's girl!" was his shout in bellicose basso. "I finish you now—once for sure."

On top of the threat came swift advance which left Childress no doubt that he was in for a fight.

CHAPTER XXII.

THREAT OF SPIKES.

THE music broke off in the middle of a run. The group at the bar pressed forward, all eager to see how this strange outlaw, who had dared them to collect the price on his head, would acquit himself against a whisky-crazed lumberjack. Delores, her interest really captured by the upstanding figure of the newcomer and clinched by that livid horseshoe scar upon his high forehead, made faltering effort to halt the trouble she had started.

"Back to your kennel, you yellow dog!" she ordered. "I'll dance with you when you pull off them spiked boots. Be yourself and show some sense."

She tried to throw herself in front of Childress and take the brunt of the jealous rush. But Childress swept her to one side and behind him.

The first blow of the contest momentarily stopped the adversary who had thundered forward with huge hands outstretched in the obvious intent to grip the sergeant's throat.

Slightly taller than Childress and much heavier,

the Swede shook himself. For a second his close-set, turquoise eyes blazed downward. Then, with lowered head, he rushed again.

That Childress had not been in the path of the human steam roller, that he had side-stepped and was urging Sven Larsen to wait a minute and have his girl returned to him, appeared only to increase the logger's fury. In the next few minutes the sergeant had no thoughts to spare from his blows and footwork.

Larsen abandoned his futile rushing tactics and tried to connect with mallet-like swings. Had one of them landed true, the innocent cause of his jealous rage must have gone to sleep for an uncertain length of time. Although strictly an amateur in all his sports, Childress had developed considerable boxing skill in his barrack days at Regina and by way of exercise in lonely posts from the Yukon to the Arctic; yet, clumsy as was the woodsman's attack, its weight taxed him to avoid being knocked out.

That Larsen shed his return attack as though it were from feather pillows instead of reasonably seasoned fists was disconcerting. The skin of the logger's face was doubtless tough as leather from years of outdoor work in all sorts of weather; moreover, it was heavily bearded and, as yet,

278 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

showed no mark. Childress was already bleeding in a couple of places from scraping blows which he had not been able altogether to avoid.

The sergeant had no "war" with the Swede. Could he have ended the futile contest by clinching and crying enough, he would have been tempted to do so for the sake of his mission. But, remembering Larsen's threat to finish him, he dared not risk putting himself under such disadvantage.

In the early days of his service with the Scarlet, when on detachment assignment with the end-of-rail crews that were building the Grand Trunk Pacific through the forests of British Columbia, he had witnessed rough-and-tumble bouts in logging camps, although this was his most active participation in one. Always the uniform had prevented his entry, even if he had been so inclined. Generally the crowd stepped in before the last breath had been crushed from the vanquished, and when the onlookers held back he had ordered festivities to cease. Twice within his knowledge, when he had been elsewhere, the crowd had waited too long and murder was the ugly result. In this rough-shod mill, he could not interfere.

His best chance seemed to lie in wearing down the self-crazed giant, then driving home a blow to chin or temple that would force a respite in which

he might explain that the black-eyed Delores was nothing of interest in his clam-shell life. Childress began to spar with caution, playing for the logger's wind whenever he was within reach, but chiefly engaging himself in keeping out of the way.

As the minutes passed with no call of time, the sergeant's plan of campaign seemed to be succeeding. Larsen's breathing sounded like the wheeze of a bellows. If he knew anything of reserve, the logger was too angry to apply the knowledge. Evidently feeling the pace telling on him, he tore at the neck of his shirt with one hand, ripping off the buttons until there was exposed a chest as hairy as that of an ape. Then he rushed the harder. Long since he had abandoned the invective of his adopted English for what were probably more weighty curses in his mother tongue.

The sentiment of the onlookers at first had been with the Swede, but this now showed division. The loggers, pressed against the wall of the dance room that the fighters might have all the room they needed, were still with Larsen. But the stranger's game battle against odds of height, reach and weight was winning him supporters among the outlaw group at the open doorway. They did not hesitate to ejaculate pithy advice and encouragement.

Then suddenly, Larsen showed himself still capable of thought. Having edged toward the on-lookers, he lurched and seized a stool which had been vacated to give room. This he spun along the floor, torn and splintered by the spikes of countless boots, toward his advancing opponent. Catching Childress at the knees, it tripped him to a heavy fall. Lunging toward him came the Swede.

Objection from the outlaw spectators showed in a forward press, gasped invective and Bart Crowe's shouted warning:

"Look out there, he means to calk you!"

Already the angry jack's purpose showed in the lift of one spiked, heavy boot. Childress realized that there was not a second to spare.

Larsen meant to calk him—the most dreaded punishment of the West woods! In the thought flashes that come in moments of stress, he remembered men who had suffered the torture and lived through its years of after horror, with cheeks and forehead pitted as from disease, noses flattened, lips punctured—even with eyes gouged out.

The spiked boot was above his head now, about to be ground down into his face. He never had thought much of his looks, but he couldn't endure to be a horror to all who, perforce, should have to notice him.

There entered in a determining thought-flash. Flame of Fire Weed was the whole of it. All of a sudden he realized that he loved the ranch girl. For her, whether he won or lost her, he must save such personal appearance as he had. Thank Heaven that he had a gun—that, although loath to draw it, never had he been beaten in point of time there-to, once his mind was made up. It was now—for Flame!

All in the same flash with his realizations, his gun hand had gone to his hip, his fair warning had been lifted.

"Take care, boozo—I've got you covered!"

The pause gained by his boast was only the length of a breath, of a look. His hand was empty—had failed to find the trusty Colt where it should have been stalled in his hip holster!

A rasped curse from the Swede sounded like the breath of an Arctic winter storm, the sort of storm he had become familiar with on his last long detail in the North.

The boot studded with calks descended, and the end—the unspeakable end—was near.

But in the fraction of the last second a fury of denial moved the seemingly helpless man upon the splintered floor. The vivid remembrance of Flame

Gallegher, freckled nose, fiery hair, had something to do with it.

"Not me; not me!" shrieked his primal appetite—his will to live.

With all the power conserved in him by years of trouble service, he threw up the arm that had reached in vain for his gun and took the Swede's tread square, without a whimper, although the pain was beyond experience.

The spikes cut into his forearm, snagging the flesh to the bone. Borrowing strength from the very torture forced upon himself, he gave an upward heave that forced him to a sitting posture and toppled Larsen to a fall.

How long Childress lay in a faint he never knew, for he forgot to ask. The only detail that mattered when he at last came to was that his agonizing effort had ended the fight. In falling backward, the logger had crashed his head against a corner of the "tin" piano and already had been carried out to sleep it off under the trees.

"And if he never comes out of it—the trance," said Crowe, "there won't be any crêpe hanging on the front door of the Nest."

"You said some words, brother!" This from Delores, who had been ministering to the sadly

punctured forearm. "I'll take him to my cabin for I guess I won him."

"What the hell did you do?" demanded the peg-leg crook.

Childress awoke—otherwise returned to consciousness. He took a look at his arm before they put upon it an antiseptic salve that any road house, used to spearing fights, keeps behind the bar. Then he did shudder at what he had escaped. Would Flame, little Flame with the delicious freckles across her nose—would she ever have looked at him again had he come back to her with the logger's mark all over his face? Of course, she would have scorned him!

Came forward then the violinist of the two-piece orchestra. He held out something that Childress had missed at a vital moment.

"Didn't it fall out of your holster when he tripped you with that stool?" asked the dope artist. "When you were heeled with all of that, me friend, why didn't you pull it sooner?"

"Never draw unless necessary," said Childress, wondering how the gun had torn loose.

"And then," declared the pasty-faced musician, "necessity ain't what it used to be!"

The sergeant was himself again. The arm still pained, but he was inured to pain. But there was

a new sort of trouble in the immediate offing—Delores.

"You'll come to my cabin," she said, as if with authority. "I know what's good for all that's happened to you, horse thief."

"Horse thief?" he asked, forgetting for the moment.

"Your forehead!" exclaimed the dark-eyed sister of trouble. "I don't mind. My only husband was one and they strung him up down Missoula way. You come with me."

Childress had no intention of going with the girl, either to her cabin or to any other. Even had he not been a clean-living soul there must have intervened that early-morning meeting with Flame Gallegher.

"It can't be done, sister," he said, offering a smile for her interest.

"But it was my fault—I got you into the mess," she protested.

"And I got out of it with small damage," he returned cheerfully. "You'd better see what you can do for our logger friend. That crack he gave his head when I threw him might well mean more than a headache to-morrow."

"To hell with——"

Having listened to the colloquy, and realizing

from the text thereof that the stranger was no ordinary philanderer, Bart Crowe stepped in with all the authority that is rested in the proprietor of an outlaw joint.

"Here you, Delores, take your damn logger to your own cabin," he said harshly. "You've made trouble enough for one afternoon. Mr. Childress is going to be my guest until he decides what he wants to do, who, with and when. Did you get that?" And he called her a name which is too descriptive for the printed page, no matter how much she may have deserved it.

Thus Sergt. Childress of the "Royal" won his spurs in the most notorious outlaw camp which the States still permits. After a supper with the "bunch," about the board at which he was freely toasted over his escape from the "logger's curse," he rented a cabin of his own and took possession, accepted fully as a horse rustler and a man who could take care of himself whatever the odds.

CHAPTER XXIII.

COMING A CROPPER.

CLOTHES, summer clothes—or rather the lack of them had taken Ethel Andress to Strathconna a few days after Childress departed on his Montana visit. Her uncle, the devoted old major, had gone with her, leaving Tom Fitzrapp in charge of the ranch and outfit. None of them knew of their neighbor's departure, or they might not have been so confident that rustling had been halted for a time, at least.

But before Ethel was through with her dress-maker a strange foreboding of range trouble harassed her. Not that any disturbing news had come from Fitzrapp, as should have been the case in the event of any unwonted happening at the ranch. Major MacDonald tried to argue against a hurried return to the Rafter A. Hadn't the horse bands been driven to the upper ranges, where they must be safe? But the fair owner's whim persisted. After they had arrived at the nearest railroad station and retrieved their buckboard team from the livery barn, she had crowded the horses over the home trail.

Old Man Cuss alone greeted the returning owner and her nearest relative when the team finally had covered the prairie miles. His face was always gloomy, so his expression told nothing.

"Everything all right on the range, Darned?" asked the widow as she unbuckled the reins and flung one to either side.

"Mostly," returned the home guard.

"Where is Mr. Fitzrapp?" she inquired.

"Up to the house, nursin' a hurt arm."

Both Mrs. Andress and the major knew Cuss's disinclination to waste any more language than was absolutely necessary. Leaving the steaming team to his mercies, they hastened their steps toward the ranch house. There they found the handsome manager stretched out on a couch in the living-room, his left arm in a sling. Ethel hurried to him anxiously.

"What in the world has happened to you, Tom?" she asked in a voice replete with sympathy.

"I came a bad cropper, Ethel, and, of course, at a decidedly inconvenient moment," returned Fitzrapp gloomily. "I'm more worried about the loss to you than about anything physical that has happened to me. I ought to be fired for the mess I've made of things."

Woman-like, she scorned interest in her own mis-

fortune until she had satisfied herself about his physical one. "Arm broken?" she asked.

The major had thrown off his coat and now approached with the semi-professional air of one skilled by long practice in the crude surgery of the plains, where operations from bringing children into the crowded world to necessary amputations generally are conducted without aid of an M. D.

"Oh, don't make such a fuss over me," said Fitzrapp, gesturing lightly with his free arm. "The wing's only sprained, I guess; I can move my fingers."

The major made a hurried but thorough examination, proving to his satisfaction that no bones were broken, and deciding, from the absence of inflammation, that the injury was trifling.

"That arm needs a good rubbing more than a sling," was the unprofessional verdict delivered, but not unkindly. "Shook you up some when you lit, I reckon. How came it?"

"Yes, how came it, Tom—and what's the new loss? I had a hunch up in 'Conna that I was in for one."

"I've been an awful fool, folks," said Fitzrapp, his face showing a disinclination to recite the details. "If you want to kick me out for this blunder you won't hear a whimper, for I deserve it."

The explosion which the younger man seemed to fear from this forecast of disaster and failure did not follow. With a control that was at variance to past bursts of temper, MacDonald drew up a chair, and his niece, the real loser, still worried over the super-employee's physical condition, stood near by.

"It'll never be a case of kick-out, Tom," said the widow, who never was more attractive than when smiling under difficulties. "How many did they get this go?"

"Thirty-odd of the two-year-olds," murmured Fitzrapp.

"The racing stock," grunted the major. "Damn them!"

"Almost out of our front yard, too. The nerve of them! Did they leave Mrs. Cuss the kitchen stove, or was it too hot to move?" This came from Ethel, at last aroused to anger.

But Fitzrapp had more in the way of news. "And—and they stole Canada, Ethel!" He called out this startling addendum with an agony of voice that reflected his great affection for the splendid black stallion.

For a moment both Ethel and her uncle sat speechless. The fleet-footed Canada was Fitzrapp's personal property, but that did not lessen

their keen regret. They fairly boiled with indignation at this crowning outrage, for the horse must have been taken from his box stall in the stable behind the ranch house.

"Wonder they didn't take the porch chairs while they were about it," blazed the major. "Let's have the whole story, Tom."

"If I hadn't been a blooming, blasted idiot," was Fitzrapp's halting start; "if Duncan O'Hara hadn't been in league with the cut-throat band from the States——"

"Dunc O'Hara!" interrupted the major. "Where in hell is that rascal? He didn't show up at the stables when we drove in."

"O'Hara is gone, Major—departed with Canada and the two-year-olds!"

Ethel took this shock stoically; asked Fitzrapp to begin at the beginning and forget the if's.

Fitzrapp pulled himself up on the couch, as though to brace himself for a distressing ordeal, and obeyed.

After the departure of Mrs. Andress and her uncle there had been several quiet days, according to Fitzrapp's account. Then O'Hara had come to him with a report that Childress had left his small ranch on the silver stallion, leaving his man, the silent Mahaffy, in charge. O'Hara had inter-

viewed the Irishman that afternoon and reported him about as communicative as a clam. After dinner that evening, Fitzrapp had discussed the rustling with the head buster; had outlined Ethel's plan of baiting the lower range and then falling upon the thieves in force sufficient to crush them.

Then it was that Duncan O'Hara had broached a daring plan. He had reminded Fitzrapp that they were both more or less in the fair owner's bad graces for their failure at the ford. The disgrace of that could be wiped out and their characters restored for the future by baiting the lower range themselves and cutting down the raiders from ambush. In case any escaped their pot shots they would have their speediest mounts in reserve and go after them for a fight to the death. O'Hara had declared that he would rather be dead than live under a cloud of cowardice.

Fitzrapp mentioned his own chagrin over his previous failures, and said that the plausible buster had finally convinced him that they could turn the trick. They had then cut out between thirty and forty of the best two-year-olds and driven them to the lower range with the aid of a couple of Indian herders. To be certain that there could be no escape, Fitzrapp had ridden Canada as the fastest horse on the ranch. Duncan O'Hara had

seemed content with the star-faced half-breed that was his regular mount.

Reaching the lower range, the two whites had left the band in charge of the bucks, who were instructed to put up no fight or objection if white men rode up and demanded the horses. Then they themselves had gone into ambush—one which O'Hara had selected as best covering the ford.

Their waiting was rewarded, Fitzrapp continued, toward the end of the second afternoon, when three well-mounted riders appeared from the south. On O'Hara's argument that they should make their proof complete by withholding fire until the raiders had started to run off the band, they had permitted the three to cross the ford. Then they had witnessed a brief parley between the whites and the Indian herders, who fell back according to instructions. The raiders started the racing-stock band toward the ford and the success of the Rafter A coup seemed assured.

Up to the very moment that it was time to fire, Fitzrapp said, he had not the slightest reason to suspect the buster. But, as he whispered, "Let them have it now!" O'Hara had sprung to his feet, bowled Fitzrapp over with a blow from the butt of his Winchester, and dashed for their hidden horses.

Stampeding his own star-face, O'Hara had

mounted Canada and ridden off after the raiders. When Fitzrapp covered him with his own rifle and commanded a halt, the traitor had responded with a jeering laugh. On trying to shoot he had made the tragic discovery that there was no cartridge under the hammer and that the repeating mechanism was hopelessly jammed.

"I emptied my automatic after him, but with no perceptible effect," continued the ranch manager. "At all events, Canada kept on running, and that was the last I saw of either of them."

"And the arm, Tom?" asked the widow, who never seemed able to worry unduly about stock losses.

"Finally I caught the star-faced beast and mounted, intending to go after the traitor and his rustling pals single-handed: but the blasted cayuse began a pitching streak that surpassed anything in my experience on this or any other range. I was thrown, and by the time I got hold of the brute's tie rope again pursuit was hopeless. Examining the saddle, I found a tickler beneath the cinch. That scoundrel, O'Hara, had carried through his preparations to the last detail. You can understand, can't you, Ethel how he accomplished it, in view of the fact that I had not the slightest suspicion regarding him?"

Fitzrapp's eyes were fixed anxiously upon his fair employer.

Mrs. Address made no effort to hide her disappointment. No more did the major. About the latter's manner there was a calm that seemed ominous. Fitzrapp felt that he could have more easily endured one of the MacDonald flares of temper with which he had had experience. Hastily he flung out the one item of consolation which he had held in reserve for this moment.

"But I did succeed in landing evidence that will convict that Childress upstart as soon as we lay our hands on him," he declared in a tone far more positive and confident than that which he had used in recounting the recent costly raid.

"There is no evidence in what you have told us," said Ethel. "Is there something more?"

"Yes. O'Hara told the whole truth when he said that Childress had abandoned his ranch. He was one of the three who rode through the gap and across the ford to roundup our horses. Look over this find. Picked it up on our side of the ford as I was coming home. Undoubtedly it had just been dropped by one of the raiders, for there was rain the night before and the book, as you see, is perfectly dry, and, besides, none but the rustlers passed."

While speaking he tossed the widow a small memorandum book bound in red leather. The fly-leaf bore the name "John Childress."

"All of the entries are interesting," continued Fitzrapp, feeling that this exhibition of concrete evidence against the rustler would turn the scale of decision in his favor. "Some of them have particular bearing upon our case against him."

He reached out for the book, and after a moment's search showed Mrs. Andress and her uncle a page of dates and numbers.

"Here, for instance, is a record of our losses from the rustlers, as accurate as our books would show it." He turned other pages. "And here are the notes he took when deciding on the location of that pretended ranch. They say there's a missing link in every criminal's make-up, and this would seem to be Childress'."

The widow looked disturbed. The major gestured for silence, and slouched down in his chair in an attitude of deep meditation. It was a considerable time before he spoke, engaged the while making a mental review of Fitzrapp's account from beginning to end, weighing the importance of each reported incident.

"Tom, what are you going to do about that race?" he demanded suddenly. "With Canada

stolen you can't live up to your agreement and Childress can claim forfeit on your thousand."

"Hell's-bells, man! You haven't an idea that Childress will appear in Strathconna for that race, have you? Why, he wouldn't dare."

"I'm not so sure," returned the major meditatively. "What leads me to believe that he will make an appearance and insist on a race is that his certificate of deposit was good. The bank paid it without a murmur, and I deposited the money to my account to await developments."

The face of Ethel Andress still wore a puzzled expression. "Childress certainly manages to turn many a card in his favor," she said, gazing out through the open window over the range to the south, now gleaming like an emerald under the ministration of the setting sun. "I'll be glad when his exact standing is settled."

"I believed from the first that the scoundrel was bluffing about that race," asserted Fitzrapp, relieved that the main subject, his overconfidence in Duncan O'Hara, was sidetracked, at least temporarily. "You'll remember, Ethel, that it first was broached that day over at Gallegher's, doubtless to impress the brat with his extravagant sportsmanship. I'm surprised at old Sam letting the girl run the range with him. If she were my child——"

Whatever the widow remembered about that day at Gallegher's evidently was not pleasant; what she knew about Flame ranging the Fire Weed with the attractive suspect unpleasing. She left the living-room for her own quarters.

"A thousand dollars is some money, young man," objected the major, following the interruption of Mrs. Andress' departure. "I can see no possible object in his making so expensive a bluff."

"Well, perhaps he did intend to race me——"

"Does intend to race you is more like it," came shrewd interruption. "And there's your opportunity, Fitzrapp. With this notebook as concrete evidence, coupled with an affidavit from Ethel regarding the theft of the horses, there isn't a doubt that we can secure a warrant for his arrest. You can spring that document on him when he appears at the fair grounds to claim your thousand; have him held under prohibitive bail, and give the authorities time to work up a complete case against him."

"But if he doesn't appear at the track——" began Fitzrapp, as though lacking the older horse-man's confidence.

"Then we must take up the hunt down in Montana," said MacDonald with eager assurance. "They'll never be able to disguise a horse like

Canada, and with him it will not be a case of brand blotting. You'll probably find the stallion in the hands of some innocent purchaser, but we surely can trace back the transfers until we get the proof on the actual thieves. Against Duncan O'Hara, the ingrate, our case is already plain enough for us to ask the police to placard him through the border states. I'll suggest to Ethel that she offer a reward of five hundred dollars for his capture."

"Aren't we, perhaps, well rid of him without wasting Lady Ethel's money on rewards?"

The doughty major was stamping up and down the living-room, as well pleased with his plan of campaign as though personal loss was involved. "Well rid nothing! The guilty must pay. I'll go see if Ethel hasn't a snap-shot of the scamp that we can use on the posters."

Thomas Fitzrapp kept to his couch and wondered if Ethel Andress would be as keen as her fighting uncle to have the guilty pay. What a nuisance this man Childress was! The widow had refused to take the taunt about his success with Flame Gallegher and there was no being certain that she had not some secret understanding of her own with this unhandsome ranch enigma whose personality seemed to sweep ordinarily sensible women off their feet. Yes, the guilty must pay!

CHAPTER XXIV.

OUT OF THE NEST.

THE days added themselves into several weeks at Crow's Nest, in the course of which Jack Childress improved upon the good impression which he had made the exciting afternoon of his entry. Delores had learned her lesson and caused him no further trouble, under strict orders from Crowe himself. Twice the branded man had left the outlaw resort for trips down into the State. No one asked him where he had gone or why. One of these departures was after Duncan O'Hara, already well known as a rustler who had won his spurs, had loped into the haven of the lawless. If he had been surprised to find Childress there, he managed to conceal the fact, and had accepted readily the stranger's invitation to share the individual hut which he had rented from Crowe.

Childress had been away on some mysterious mission when Smiling Dick Murdock arrived with a small bunch of Lazy G stock and was welcomed as a proven companion in crime. It chanced that no one thought to tell him that the hard-hitting

Childress had won his right to consider himself one of them.

The next afternoon following Murdock's arrival, the sergeant rode in, superbly mounted and without the nondescript horse on which he had departed. As the white flag was flying from the pole on the cliff behind the ranch at the entrance gap, his arrival had caused no excitement in the Nest and did not delay a single dance at the main establishment. For a couple of hours, Childress was busy within his own cabin. When he went over to the saloon-dance-hall, after giving his new mount a careful grooming, he saw a strange horse with dropped rein standing out front—a strange horse, lathered from hard riding, yet an animal which he thought he had seen before. Apprehension gripped him, hastening his stride into the almost deserted bar-room and on to the dance floor beyond.

And there, sure enough, she was!

Flame of Fire Weed—little Flame with the freckle-bridged nose—with her back up against the tin-piano and a gun in her hand.

Childress paused just a moment to take stock of the surprising situation. Plastered against the wall were the women "regulars," the harpies of the outlaw camp; the two who composed the orchestra, the bartender and several outlaw "guests."

But the figure who particularly claimed Childress' attention was the bow-legged one of Smiling Dick Murdock, evidently under the influence of hooch, who stood confronting the girl who was at bay.

"So, my little firecracker, got some sense when her sweetie rode away—when her sweetie rode away," he was saying, his famous smile a triumphant leer. "Couldn't stand the thought of separation, could you, Bernie dear?" He lurched toward her.

"Stand back!" she cried. "Stand back or I'll separate you from life! You know I didn't follow you here, you horse thief."

Murdock's laugh set Childress' blood on fire, but, his presence in the doorway as yet unnoticed, he held in for the moment.

"That's the girl—that's the red-head!" chortled Murdock. "Scratch and claw to the very end. Over on the ranch, t'other side of the line I was willing to give you the benefit of all the clergy you could round up. Now that you've followed me here to Crow's Nest, we'll dispense with the ceremony. Come hither, that me tender arms may crush you to me manly breast. You're mine——"

"Quite enough of that, Murdock!" The command from Childress gained stress from its surprise. He strode out on the floor, ready to do

battle for the only woman he had ever loved. Why she was there, evidently unattended, in this ribald heart of the outlaw camp, he did not know. He was sure, however, that she had not followed her father's ranch foreman from any heart impulse. He feared, indeed, that she had come out of anxiety over himself, to bring him warning of impending danger or to cast her lot with his in the solving of the rustling mystery, the answer to which already was in his keeping.

Murdock spun half around at the sound of Childress' voice. His instant recognition showed in the flush of hate that suffused his face. For a moment he was speechless.

"You—you here?" he cried when he had thrown off his tongue the shackles of surprise.

"Yes, he's here!" shrilled the girl. "I came to meet him. With Jack and no one else I'll go away."

Murdock, in his self-satisfied, alcoholic vanity, had paid small attention to Flame's automatic. But now he drew and with lightning speed threw down upon the sergeant, already advancing upon him. The report of his Colt roared like a cannon in the low roofed room. But his wonted skill was lacking. The bullet caressed Childress' cheek, tingled the

tip of his ear and thudded into one of the timbers that framed the doorway.

Next second Childress' gun spoke. This time there was no miss. Murdock clutched at his breast, spun half around and crumpled upon the calk splintered floor.

At once the sergeant gained the side of the girl who had dared so much in his behalf. His revolver waved both threat and promise to the humans who plastered the walls. It advised them to hold their places and the advice was well understood.

To get Flame out of the place was his first thought and the regular exit, through the bar, seemed too fraught with danger. Behind the piano was an open window. To this he waved Flame and covered her exit. Then he dived after her, just as Murdock recovered sufficiently from lead shock to gain a sitting posture.

"After him, boys," Childress heard the cry. "He's an officer—a spy. The brand's a fake."

With his arm half supporting the girl, he hurried her through the timber of the "park" and gained the cabin which he had rented, in the lean-to of which was the wonder horse which he had brought back to camp from his latest ride to the south. For the moment they had respite, but the sergeant knew that it only was for the moment.

304 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Murdock would be able to convince the outlaws in camp that Crowe had made a mistake in taking him in. Just how much the handsome crook knew of the truth was problematical, but the mere fact that Childress had taken up arms in defence of the daughter of a rancher as well known as Sam Gallagher would be enough. They two were in for a battle—one in which no quarter would be given. That a woman was involved was her own look out; the outlaws would argue that she should not have butted into the enemy's country. Their lives, liberty and the integrity of this last haven of refuge were at stake. Nothing else would count.

"Why did you come, Flame?" he asked in the moment that was left them before the siege would begin.

"Day before yesterday, out on the range, Murdock played all his trumps, demanding that I run away with him," she returned, leaning close to him, as if the contact assured protection. "Roper and Rust helped me save myself. They're on the level, those busters, despite what they once tried to do to you. From them I learned that Murdock knew that in some way you were allied with the law. I feared that he was coming here when he shook the ranch with a small herd of dad's blacks. I was—

was afraid for you and came to warn you. Found you'd ridden south and stumbled into Murdock before I could take the back track."

"Gamest little pal a man ever had—especially an undeserving, ungainly old roughneck like me," he murmured.

"You're not any of that, Jack," she whispered back. There were none near enough to hear, so the only excuse for the whisper must have been that it seemed more appropriate to the sentiment of the moment.

"We're in a tight hole, Flame," he said with more emotion than his voice usually carried. "Likely we'll get out. Luck ought to be with us. But if worst comes, I want you to know that I love you and that you're the first woman I ever said that to, you dearest of firebrands!"

Then came the first shot of the offence, a rifle bullet that flattened itself against the stout door. Childress threw the blankets from his bunk.

"The base logs of the cabin are thicker," he said. "Lay down as close to the wall as possible and be out of the way of stray bullets. This cabin was built for defence, even if not for our sort of defenders. If we can stave them off until dark, we'll make a run for it."

"But I want to help," she protested.

"You can help best by keeping out of danger. There's just one rifle and our revolvers are good only for close quarters. Let me try my best——"

A patter of shots thudding into the walls of the cabin interrupted with the word that the fight was on in earnest. One stray bullet found a loophole and crashed against the opposite wall.

"Please, precious o' mine!" Gently he urged her to the blankets on the floor, where she lay under the protection of the heavy foundation logs.

For once Flame obeyed. From somewhere in the mystic maze of memory came comforting thought. Someone, perhaps a poet, had written and she had read that a woman is greatly loved to whom a man speaks with tenderness at a time of desperate peril. Their peril was, to say the least, desperate. And her Jack had spoken with more tenderness than she ever expected to hear him express. She thrilled with love for him, as he picked up the Winchester, which he had stood beside the door on his return from the trip south. When he had made certain that the magazine held its limit of cartridges, he sent some random shots from several of the loopholes.

Calm as was Childress externally, he felt within the sick fear of a child, because he knew himself to be but inadequate protection for the girl who

shared the grave peril with him. But this feeling he was able to banish by activity with the rifle; and when that grew heated, with his revolver.

"Got one of 'em that time!" he chuckled after some minutes of random firing. "Guess that'll tell the bunch not to rush this shack; at least not until after dark, and then we won't be here for the reception."

He did not tell her that "one of 'em" had got him through the shoulder, a wound that was painful but not crippling.

"But how can we both get away?" she asked, handing him a rifle she had been reloading. "I left my horse down at the main dive."

"I have another wonder horse in the lean-to back of the cabin," he said. "The beast won't consider you extra weight, little Flame. As soon as it's dark, we'll bust out and give them a run for their money, my life and something more than life for you."

There came a lull in the firing and he slipped out through the back door to saddle the magnificent piece of horseflesh which he had acquired somewhere to the south. The girl followed him, noticed the difficulty he had swinging the heavy cow saddle into place, and then saw the crimson stain upon his shirt between collar-bone and shoulder.

308 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

"They hit you," she whispered. "Let me see—how bad."

He waved her back.

"Oh, Jack, if anything should happen to you after—after this afternoon, I don't want to live." This, he realized, was the offering of excess emotion, but he fully appreciated it.

"Nothing's going to happen—at least nothing has happened that a few days and a minister won't remedy," he reassured her.

Fortunately for them the season of long Western twilights had not yet arrived. Night fairly crashed down upon them. An hour later he fired from each of the loopholes in turn, then led her to the improvised stable.

"Just one, before we see whether old lady Fate is with or against us," he said.

She came into his arms without the slightest pressure and with no maidenly excuse that might have sprung to her lips had the situation been less vivid. For one long moment their lips were together. Then he swung into the saddle, perched on the cantle, and, lifting her bodily, placed her in front of him. According to all reasonable expectations, bullets of protest would come from behind. With a word to the brave horse, the dash out of Crow's Nest was on.

CHAPTER XXV.

GRIP OF THE LAW.

TEN o'clock was the hour set down in the articles of agreement for the running of the challenge race, and Major MacDonald himself had arranged for the use of the Strathcona track at that time. The exposition authorities were glad to grant the favor to one who had supported that institution so generously in its early days, when such assistance was badly needed. Two of the judges and the regular starter had consented to serve, eager to take part in anything in which the pioneer, who had done so much for the province, was interested.

With none of these arrangements had MacDonald interfered since his return with Mrs. Andress and Fitzrapp from the Rafter A with the knowledge that Canada had been stolen. It was his idea that they should appear at the track just as though nothing had happened and take no steps that might alarm Childress, in case he was foolhardy enough to attempt to save his thousand and claim Fitzrapp's forfeit.

Accordingly, at half-past nine on the appointed morning, a touring car drew up at the gates, car-

310 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

rying the pioneer, the widow and Fitzrapp in the tonneau, and a stranger in a brown suit and gray derby on the seat beside the chauffeur. The little party went directly to the green before the grandstand, where they were joined shortly by the officials whose services had been requested.

Although the great open-faced stand was practically deserted, there was plenty of life and movement in its immediate vicinity. Next morning the fair would be thrown open to the public, so that the last hour preparations were being rushed. Refreshment tents and canvas catchpenny booths were in process of erection or receiving their finishing touches. Tardy exhibits were being brought to their proper buildings, and an unending stream of blooded cattle and thoroughbred horses passed on toward the stables. On the broad track itself a force of ground keepers were at work, although the great circle already seemed to have attained the proverbial smoothness of a ballroom floor.

"I've an idea that we brought you gentlemen out this morning under false pretenses," MacDonald was saying to the officials. "I'm afraid that one of the horses will not appear and that the challenge will have to go unsettled."

"Always sorry to miss a close match race, Major," returned the starter; "but don't let that

worry——” He broke off abruptly and stared toward the paddock gate. “Good heavens! Will you look at that magnificent horse!”

The others turned to see Jack Childress approaching. Behind him strode the silver stallion, and still farther in the rear trailed Mahaffy, burdened with a cow saddle.

Admiring exclamations sprang from several lips, Mrs. Andress’ and the major’s among them, for although they were acquainted with the fine points of Silver, they never had seen him so finely groomed. Fitzrapp’s glance of recognition had brought a start of surprise, for he had confidently expected that Childress would fail to accept this last daring chance. Evidently the man’s boldness knew no limits.

As he drew near the owner of the one-section ranch waved a greeting to the men and took off his hat to the widow, who was the only woman in the immediate party. Mrs. Andress had been asked by her uncle not to precipitate matters by showing a changed manner toward the suspect in case he did appear. She forced a smile to accompany her bow; then quickly looked away.

“Well, Fitzrapp, I’m on deck, you see,” said Childress, addressing his rival. “Not so good getting back from Montana, but I’m here, and, thanks

to Mahaffy's care, Silver is ready to give your beast the run of his life. Suppose you call up your horse, and we'll get ready for the starter's gun."

"You know very well that you——"

The outburst from Fitzrapp was interrupted when the heavy hand of the major fell upon his shoulder.

"Through circumstances beyond his control," the pioneer interposed, "Mr. Fitzrapp's horse, Canada, is not available for racing to-day. As stakeholder, I'm ready to hear your desire regarding the purse to which you both contributed."

The look on Childress' face was so akin to genuine surprise that Ethel Andress had difficulty in disbelieving it, although she knew it could not be real. "He adds fine acting to his many other accomplishments," she reflected bitterly. "What a pity he couldn't have been a real man."

"Circumstances beyond his control, eh?" repeated Childress. "Well, now, that's sure too bad. Silver and I don't want any runaway money, do we, boy?" He stroked the stallion's satiny neck meditatively. "Tell you what I'll do; I've got another horse down in the paddock that looks as if he'd be a fit match for the silver one here. I'll lend him to Fitzrapp, and we'll have a race anyway, so long as we're all here."

"Rediculous!" cried the Rafter A manager. "Race against a man with his own horse! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

The other horsemen smiled at the odd proposal.

"Wait until you've seen the horse before you decide," urged Childress. "He sure looks like a winner, and I feel this morning as if nothing but a horse race would satisfy my appetite. Running Silver against time isn't ever going to do it."

He turned to the little Irishman. "Mahaffy, suppose you go back to the stable and bring up my new horse."

While they waited, he entered unconcernedly into the conversation, which was centered upon the fine points of the silver beast. Looking at him and listening to him, the widow could not comprehend how he managed to maintain such poise, considering the strain under which he must be laboring. Nor could she see by what possible expedient he hoped to carry off his effrontery.

Standing a little to one side of the group about the stallion, she was the first to sight the horse which Mahaffy was leading from the paddock. For a moment she stared in silence; then an amazed cry sprang from her lips.

"Look, Tom! Look! There's Canada. The man's bringing on your stolen horse!"

314 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

They all turned and saw that the wrangler was advancing with a horse they knew—Canada, the prize-winning black stallion that Thomas Fitzrapp had exhibited so often.

An imprecation burst from Fitzrapp's lips. Then he sprang toward the horse. The black recognized him with a delighted whinny, and nosed him when he came within reach. There was no doubt that an affection existed between man and beast. Tears gushed into Fitzrapp's eyes, and as for Canada, had there been any question of original ownership, his behavior would have settled it in the manager's favor in the decision of any unbiased jury.

"Told you to wait until you'd seen the horse," said Childress with a chuckle. "This was my little surprise party. Now we can have an honest-to-goodness race according to agreement."

"How comes it that you bring up Mr. Fitzrapp's mount?" asked the most imposing of the race judges, giving Childress a look of open suspicion.

"Because circumstances beyond his control prevented him from bringing up the beast himself," returned the imperturbable owner of the Open A.

The thought that Childress must have lost his mind rushed into Ethel's brain, and she pitied him. There seemed no other reasonable explanation for this piling of folly upon folly.

A look from the major moved Fitzrapp to speech. "Gentlemen, this horse was stolen from me, and from the first I suspected that Childress was concerned in the theft. Why he brought the animal here is unexplainable, but does not concern us. Officer, you had better take him in charge."

The big man in the gray derby stepped forward importantly and laid a hand on Childress' shoulder. The latter made no effort to throw off the clutch, nor did he protest when the official ran his hands over his body in search of weapons.

"What's all this about?" he inquired, a puzzled expression on his face.

"You're under arrest; that's what it is about," said the policeman. "Here's the warrant if you want to read it."

Childress took the paper, and scanned it rapidly.

"Looks regular enough," he remarked, slipping the warrant into his coat pocket. "So we aren't going to have a race—after all the trouble I've been put to?"

"Not to-day," returned the officer with a grin. "Not so's you'd notice the dust."

There seemed to awaken in Childress a sudden realization of his position. He jerked out the warrant and read it more carefully.

"Is this jolly little document based upon any-

thing more stable than the information and belief of Mr. Thomas Fitzrapp, of Strathconna, the Rafter A Ranch and *elsewhere?*" he asked.

A thread of defiance in his tone caused Ethel Andress again to look at him searchingly. It seemed impossible that he could be what circumstances proved him to be.

"The warrant has substantial basis," said Maj. MacDonald. "Here for instance is a memorandum book, purporting to be the property of one Jack Childress. It is filled with rustling data and was picked up in the track of the last raid upon our stock."

Childress bowed recognition of the book. "I'll be glad to get you back, old stand-by, when the court is through with you. I dropped you that day I rode to the Rafter A to sign the terms of today's race. Fitzrapp must have picked you up and neglected to return you." He turned to the local officer. "Will you be kind enough to come over to the stables until we put up the horses and I get out of these riding clothes."

"I'll put an officer on guard of the horses," said the policeman as they walked off toward the stables.

None paid any attention to a gestured signal which Childress threw toward the grandstand. There it was picked up and understood by a slender

little woman in a blue twill dress and dark mushroom hat. She left the seat which she had occupied alone and approached the group that waited beneath the starter's stand.

Ten minutes passed when came the return from the stables, a return that added to the day's total of surprises. The two who accompanied the local officer wore the brilliant parade uniforms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police—Childress with the trappings of a staff-sergeant, Mahaffy in the plainer suit of a trooper. Heavy revolvers bristled in ominous black from the hip holsters of each. They strode with the swank of long service, and the local policeman seemed entirely satisfied to toddle along in the rear.

The eyes of all the waiting group were opened wide with surprise, all eyes except the blue ones of Bernice Gallagher, otherwise Flame of Fire Weed.

"No need of further delay," said Sergt. Childress with authority. "Do your duty, Constable Mahaffy."

The veteran constable was so glad to be back in uniform after long service in ranch-hand disguise that he threw unusual feeling into the form of arrest and warning of Thomas Fitzrapp on the charge of horse stealing from the Rafter A and other ranches.

318 THE LONG ARM OF THE MOUNTED

Ethel Address and her uncle, after a moment of startled silence, turned accusing gaze on their trusted employee. For the moment Fitzrapp seemed stunned by the sudden turn which the case had taken.

"Come, Fitzrapp," said the sergeant in a tone that was persuasive, even though it did not lack in firmness, "you've run your course, and you might as well give up. You sold Canada to Dick Allen in Missoula, and it's one of the few honest sales you ever made. I bought him from Allen and have his bill-of-sale. I have proof that you are the head of the rustling band which has been ravishing the Fire Weed country. Indeed, except for a few miserable tools, you are the whole band. I suppose you thought you needed the dirty money to make good on your suit for the hand of your employer."

Mrs. Address was turning away when first she noticed the presence of the Gallegher girl. Flame, in full womanly sympathy, sprang to her side to offer comfort.

"Just think what he's saved me from," murmured the widow.

"Yes, and isn't he just—just wonderful!" enthused Sam Gallegher's "firecracker."

"Come across clean, Fitzrapp," Childress was urging. "It will be the better for you. From the moment I had Canada brought out on the track this

morning, you must have known that I was sure of my ground."

With a stubborn spirit that had always stood out in his character, Fitzrapp kept his lips closed and his eyes on the ground.

"It looks as though I'd have to send for an interesting witness I've held in reserve down at the hotel," Childress resumed. "I have in mind one Duncan O'Hara, formerly head buster on the Rafter A, the man who brought me word of Canada's new owner. If it had not been for him we might still be beating about the range seeking definite proof of Fitzrapp's duplicity. As it is, we've filled a royal flush."

At last the range manager broke under the weight of evidence. "You won't need O'Hara," he said slowly, a bitter note, which he was unable to banish, creeping into his tone. "If he's double-crossed me, there's no use trying to fight. My hand is all played out."

"Take him to the city prison, Mahaffy," ordered Childress. "I've got to go down to the court house and clear this warrant off the boards."

When the constable and his prisoner had entered a taxi and driven out of the exposition grounds, the sergeant turned to the widow.

"Although you two women never have met, you

seem to have found some bond in common," he said with a whimsical grin. "Permit me to present Mrs. John Childress, so new to the part that she'd probably stumble if you'd asked her to name her real name."

"Ah, my hearty congratulations to you both," said the gallant old major effusively.

"A romance of the Fire Weed," murmured Ethel Andress, and embraced the fair neighbor. "When did it happen, my dear?"

"If by it you mean when we were married—that was yesterday afternoon when we rode in from the ranch," said Flame, flaunting furious blushes. "But it wasn't exactly a romance of our Fire Weed range. Seems to me it was all settled one stormy afternoon in Crow's Nest of all places. At least we were certain when we succeeded in riding out through a hail of outlaw lead."

"It's fine to have married into the Royal," said the widow, any past interest she may have had in the enigma of the Open A forgot.

"Jack never told me that he was a Mountie," said the colorful bride, her freckled eyes more alive than usual. "Thanks to a moonlight meeting on a night that was touch-and-go with tragedy, I knew from the first. As long as he was in mufti I pretended blind ignorance. But just because he didn't

confide in me, I think I'll marry him out of the Service. We need him down on the range."

"That will be a loss to the service," began the major, "but—"

"But we're trained to obey our superior officers," Childress cut in. "As soon as this case is cleaned, I reckon Ottawa will have a chance to weep over my resignation. I've an idea that I'll complete that cabin, begun as a subterfuge, and even build a dog-house for Poison. Just perhaps I'll come to enjoy ranching in Fire Weed with the Flame thereof."

"You better had—enjoy it!"

Mrs. John Childress blazed the last word.

THE END.

